

Morton defends council's convention trip

By Chris Sykes Staff Writer

At-Large Councilman Rayfield Morton defended the decision of him and his colleagues to attend the recent New Jersey State League of Municipalities convention.

During last week's City Council meeting, Morton said residents who questioned the necessity and expenses for council members who traveled to the annual convention in Atlantic City needed to "get off it." He said he and his colleagues are caught in a "catch-22" situation. Morton said residents want the council members to do better jobs as elected officials, yet some of the same people criticize them when they do something such as attend a summit where officials and representatives at various levels of government gather to share ideas and best practices.

"We have people who say we don't know what we're doing, but then when we go to learn something we get criticized — it's not fair," said Morton. "I went to Atlantic City to find out how I can do a better job as a councilman. I sat in on a couple of really informative and educational seminars and discussion sessions that I believe will really benefit the people of Orange."

Morton responded to criticism from members of the audience during a public comment portion of the Nov. 16 meeting. Some speakers questioned the necessity for the "expensive" trip to Atlantic City. Expenses included travel and hotel fees for elected officials and city employees who choose to go and who pass on the cost to taxpayers by submitting vouchers for reimbursement.

The questioning did not stop with speakers at the council meeting. The following day, after the council voted against accepting the budget introduction of Mayor Eldridge Hawkins Jr., the mayor blasted traveling council members.

"Council members feigned alarm at the estimated tax rate last night, then turned around and left today on a junket to Atlantic City that will cost taxpayers thousands of dollars," Hawkins said in a statement. "This is in contrast to the administration, which has banned unnecessary travel."

The theme of the inquiries was: Why travel to Atlantic City for a "glorified vacation" when there are many problems in the city, such as an unfinished budget, skyrocketing property taxes, looming home foreclosures and other pressing issues that need immediate attention? Morton's response to those questions, after traveling down to Atlantic City despite them, was "it was worth the trip."

"You can't play us on both sides of the fence," said Morton. "The amount of money we get paid for being on the council compared to the time and effort we put in is relatively small. I would like to say to these same people: you all need to stop it. Get off it."

Morton said he would also urge some of the council's detractors to "get a life."

Managing Editor John Zucal contributed to this story.