

11/01/2008

Assemblyman addresses village group on sharing local services

By EMILIA TEASDALE

CHATHAM--Assemblyman Marcus Molinaro (R- 103rd) spoke about efficiency in government, when he addressed a group of concerned taxpayers in the village Monday evening.

Georgene Gardner, a member of an informal group of concerned village residents called Taxing Matters, invited Mr. Molinaro to speak at the Tracy Memorial October 28. Mr. Molinaro, a Republican who is up for reelection November 4 and is running against Democrat Anne Rubin, was mayor of the Village of Tivoli in Dutchess County. He now represents the part of the Village of Chatham that lies within the Town of Ghent. The northern half of the village is in the Town of Chatham, which is part of another Assembly district.

Ms. Gardner said the group was interested in learning how the village can reduce duplication of services and look into shared services with other municipalities.

"Anything one municipality can do on their own they can do collectively," Mr. Molinaro told the group, adding that many local governments are not aware of how much they can share.

He talked about his experience as mayor of the small village, which shared services like garbage collection and snow removal with the larger municipalities.

He also talked about grant money that is available to villages, saying that in his 13 years as mayor he found \$6 million in grants to fund several community projects. He mentioned the Government Efficiency Grant Fund, which gives out grants annually. He said that Columbia County was one of first places to receive money from that fund.

Mr. Molinaro stressed that grant-making organizations are more likely to give money to municipalities that have consensus. He said he could mention 72 grant programs off the top of his head at the meeting, but he cautioned, "They want to give to communities who work together," because they want to fund programs they know will work. "You have to have consensus, and it takes a lot of work, a lot of energy and a lot of patience," he said.

Asked by an audience member for his views on dealing with village trustees averse to change, Mr. Molinaro said that as a mayor, he tried to find a way to gain the trust of the people on his board who where opposed to change. But he also said the community needs to find people to run for the board-"not the most combative person"-and use community organization to "erode" the anti-change agents on the board.

When a taxpayer at the meeting said that the biggest part of the Chatham village budget is the village police force, Mr. Molinaro responded that Tivoli dissolved its police force in the 1980s, many years before he became mayor. He lamented that move, saying that the village "lost a lot of our community identity" as a result. He said every time a new county deputy sheriff was assigned to the village he had to "retrain them," letting the deputy know how things worked in the village.

Mr. Molinaro said that mostly involved asking the deputies to be less severe in the law enforcement activities, like not giving out as many parking tickets and being sensitive to the issues in the village.

He said that Tivoli cut its assessors office from the budget while he was mayor, an issue that came up recently for the Village of Chatham, after a report commissioned by the county found that the village was duplicating assessment services already available from the neighboring towns. Mr. Molinaro said that Dutchess County has a law requiring that towns assess property in a village.

Another issue in the village that residents have noticed is that snowplows from the towns and county lift their plows as they drive along village streets during storms. "There is no law that prohibits them from keeping the plow down," said Mr. Molinaro, but he said the decision where to plow involves insurance. As mayor, he made an agreement with the county that whoever got to a snow-covered street first plowed it.

He said that sharing services is not something agreed on with a handshake, because of funding. He also said the Office of the State Comptroller would come to the village, if asked, to do an audit of services and offer ideas about where services could be shared. He said there are not many examples in the state where consolidation of services rather than sharing has worked, but some villages have done that as well.

The Taxing Matters group plans to hold more meetings about efficiency in village government. Village Trustee Lael Locke was the only Village Board member to attend the meeting this week.

The Village Board normally meets the 2nd and 4th Thursdays of the month at 7:30 p.m. at the Tracy Memorial.

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