FW Mayor, Council Question Effort to Consolidate SP, FW

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SCOTCH PLAINS — A public hearing was held Monday night at the Scotch Plains Municipal Building on the application by the organization Courage to Reconnect Scotch Plains/Fanwood (CTR-SPF) seeking local and state endorsement to study consolidating the two towns.

In attendance were Fred Lange, chairman of CTR-SPF; Christopher Vaz, assistant divisions director at the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs; Eugene McCarthy, involved with a 2011 consolidation study of Princeton Borough and Princeton Township, and Gina Genovese, executive director of Courage to Connect (CTC). There was an audience of 30 citizens and local officials.

After a brief introduction by Mr. Vaz, the floor was opened to public comment. The crowd expressed several misgivings.

“I’d like to question what the qualifications of this group are to initiate this study inasmuch as they are not involved in local government, have not shown any public service involvement whatsoever to the best of my knowledge, and have never shown themselves to (borough) council,” Fanwood Councilman Mike Szuch said.

Fanwood Mayor Colleen Mahr expressed displeasure of the modus operandi of the group and touted ongoing shared services between the two towns as a faster means of achieving similar savings.

“I’d like to know what their history in local government or local issues are that prove, frankly, they’re qualified to act in the best of the public interest now,” Mayor Mahr said.

“We are all on the same page when we say property taxes are breaking the backs of our local Fanwoodians,” she said. “Your goal to reduce property taxes is our goal to reduce property taxes. We are just choosing, at the electoral level, to go about it in a very different way. We believe shared services is the best route to get us there... [Police] is the largest line item in both towns’ budgets, over 25 percent respectively, and we are making headway.”

Another complaint made concerned the short notice of the meeting. In compliance with the Open Public Meetings Act, the meeting was advertised three days in advance. Some stated they were unable to locate a copy of CTR-SPF’s application.

“We don’t have a horse in this race,” Mr. Vaz said. “We are here to moderate, to provide technical assistance.”

Ms. Genovese, a former councilwoman and mayor of Long Hill Township, said the state’s presence at Monday’s meeting was merely educational, not to take a position on whether or not the proposed consolidation should occur.

“Ultimately, it’s up to the voters to say ‘are we better together’?” she assured. “If it doesn’t come from the people, from everybody working together, then it’s not good.”

CTR-SPF enlisted CTC, a non-partisan group, to assist — whether or not a third party should study the fiscal impact of consolidating the two towns. In the case of Princeton, the study ended up costing $75,000. CTR-SPF would be required to furnish the funds should a study be authorized.

After such a study, the state makes a recommendation. If positive, the question is put to the voters in the towns. Consolidation would take effect if the vote passes in both towns.

CTR-SPF was founded in March of 2011 by Mr. Lange and is comprised of 10 citizens from Scotch Plains and Fanwood. Mr. Lange described the group as “small, but active,” hoping to lower taxes for residents by combining the resources of the two towns and eliminating waste.

Mr. Lange insisted that the lack of prior involvement in politics is precisely in line with the group’s desire to abstain from politics as much as possible during the process.

“This is a citizens’ action. And because it’s a citizens’ action, we don’t want to get involved with poli-