

SHINING LIGHT IN DARK SPACES:

A Hyperlocal Reporter's Guide to Covering
Municipal Government in New Jersey



"As a journalist for the better part of three decades in NJ, I think this resource guide is tremendously insightful and useful. It's NJ's journalistic equivalent to the media's grammatical and usage guide developed by Strunk and White. It's that good."

- Jim McQueeney, Chairman, Winning Strategies; Former White House Bureau Chief, Star-Ledger

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“Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.”

-Thomas Jefferson

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

As newspapers continue to reduce their local coverage, the role of recently emerging hyperlocal news websites is becoming more and more critical. In many places, we are now the “paper of record” that provides people most of their news about their hometowns. That’s a daunting and solemn responsibility, one that rests at the core of American democracy. By fulfilling our First Amendment duties, reporters function as public servants as much as any elected officials do. We embody the Constitution, and preserve and uphold it, just as the armed forces and the judiciary do.

Thomas Jefferson said, “Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.”

But Jefferson also recognized the pitfalls of the Fourth Estate: “The man who reads nothing at all is better educated than the man who reads nothing but newspapers.”

With years of training, and while working under the tutelage of editors with decades of experience, newspaper reporters have struggled to rise above Jefferson’s less than flattering assessment of journalism to achieve the ideal he espoused for our profession. For those of us in the fast-paced and demanding business of online news, the challenges are greater. Without the benefit of having a newsroom filled with savvy colleagues to use as sounding boards, we largely are on our own when we make decisions on finding news and reporting it in the most fair and accurate manner. We are the reporter, editor and publisher all wrapped up in one.

The Citizens Campaign commissioned this guide as a tool, something to help provide direction and guidance as journalists navigate the local government and politics in this new hyperlocal world. Not everything will apply to all news sites and all towns. Good journalism also requires flexibility and adaptability. Also, don’t expect to be able to do all of this all of the time. But by doing some of it most of the time we will better serve our readers and our communities.

Know the Rules

Coverage of local government rests at the core of the local news mission. But how do we get information about the workings of local government? The answer varies from town to town around the state. Each has its own practices, customs and policies regarding the media. For example, one town may permit its municipal department heads to talk to the media, while another may limit interviews, allowing only its public information officer to deal with the press.

But there are state laws and rules that apply consistently throughout New Jersey -- the Open Public Meetings Law, the Open Public Records Act (OPRA), and Executive Order #69 (see appendix) -- that guarantee us access. Take some time to read and research them. These are the rules all local governments must abide by. They give us the right to be in the audience when officials deliberate public issues. They give us the right to ask for the mayor's salary and to expect an answer within 24 hours. They give us the right to find out whether people were arrested, and if they were, where, what time and on what charges.

Even with state law on our side, it still may be difficult to access certain documents or important information. By knowing the rules and knowing what to ask for, we have a better chance of getting all the information to which we are entitled. If the community development director refuses to provide you with a contract with the development company owned by the mayor's brother, point out that the contract is covered by the state's public records law. If that doesn't work, contact the business administrator and municipal lawyer. Cite OPRA to them. If the desk sergeant doesn't want to tell you why a man was taken from the town's largest bank in handcuffs the day before, call the police chief and say you're seeking arrest information covered by Executive Order 69. That works better than simply complaining about the sergeant.

Getting Started

This guide may seem geared towards someone who is just getting started in a town. That's not entirely true. These are steps that would help someone who's been covering a town for five years or five days.

a) Learn the lay of the land. Ask prominent people in the

community to give you tours of the town. Who should you ask? Almost anyone. The mayor, the chamber of commerce director, the local historian, the police union president, a citizen activist, the head of the parent-teachers organization. Of course, don't ask them all at once. But definitely take more than one tour. It's the essence of journalism to process information from multiple viewpoints. The more eyes through which we see the town the more comprehensive is our understanding of it.

The tour provides far more than background information. It will generate story ideas. The parent will show you the dangerous intersection where folks have been fighting to have a traffic light installed. The mayor will show you the abandoned factory that he hopes to redevelop. The activist will show you the same factory and talk about the possibility of it becoming a park or nature preserve. And so on. Even if you've lived in the town all your life, take the tours. Officials will mention plans, proposals and issues that are happening behind the scenes.

- b) Learn the cast of characters and how they're connected. Ask the municipal clerk for the resumes for the mayor, town council members and department heads. Knowing their professions, their employers, their community group memberships, church affiliations etc. will provide insight into why they make the decisions they make. (Forging a constructive good relationship with the municipal clerk is of high importance, since they are charged with handling your open records requests and are a great source of valuable information about the workings of the municipal government.) File an OPRA request for their annual financial disclosure reports, which list all sizeable sources of income, including those of their spouses and live-at-home children. For example, you might find out that the business administrator's wife works for the engineering firm picked to redesign town hall. But probably you won't come across anything so dramatic. Still, the more information you have, the better you'll be able to cover your towns.
- c) Build your own reference library of key documents and data. This would include electronic documents and hard copies. Start out by filing an OPRA request to obtain complete municipal payroll

information. Get all employees' names, job titles, departments and salaries. Ask for the information as of the first day of the current fiscal year. You also should get the same information for the most recently-completed fiscal or calendar year. When requesting past information, ask for the last two years, ask for it in the format of an Excel spreadsheet and ask that the numbers be broken down into base salary, overtime payments and other payments, which includes longevity. Right away, if you have some experience with Excel, that data will allow you to write a substantive story on whether municipal overtime went up or down the previous year, which departments had the biggest changes and which employees collected the biggest OT checks.

But more importantly, that data will provide a reference source that you can consult in the course of the year as you do reporting. For example, if residents at a city council meeting complain about the upkeep of the town parks, by having all that payroll information, you can include in your story how much the parks department spends on employee salaries, whether it has more or fewer employees than the previous year and whether it has decreased overtime spending in the parks department. That's not information a local government would be quick to provide in the heat of a controversy. But by building your library, you'll have it already in hand.

Here are some other documents to include in your library:

- Municipal budgets for the past several years
- Municipal master plan
- Recent copies of the State Police Uniform Crime Report for you town
- School board payroll and budget
- Payroll and budget documents for various quasi-independent agencies in your municipality, like a water commission, parking authority, utilities authority or housing authority
- Campaign finance reports from recent municipal elections

- Minutes of Council Meetings
- Contracts with key professionals, like the town's attorney and engineer

Finally, become somewhat of a pack rat. Obtain and save studies, government letters, press releases. File them in some way that you have easy access to them. Your town, for example, may have a consultant do a report on its recreational facilities inventory and needs. Eight months later, a company may propose building a golf driving range on some desolate land. By saving the recreation study, you can report whether a driving range was one the priorities the consultant identified, and if not, exactly what those priorities were.

Press releases and copies of officials' statements can become wonderful reporting tools. Sometimes, officials make promises or commitments in press releases in search of a quick headline that makes them look good. By saving press releases, you can hold your town's officials accountable.

- d) Create a news calendar of upcoming events, deadlines, target dates. This will help you plan and manage your time so you don't have to react to things at the last minute. More importantly, such a calendar becomes another tool for holding officials accountable.

If the mayor announces in June that he expects to create an environmental commission by the end of the year, go to December on your calendar and mark that down. You may forget about his promise, he may forget about it, everybody may forget about it. But come late December, your calendar will remind you to ask the mayor about the environmental commission. If nothing has happened in six months, that now becomes a story because the mayor hasn't made good on his promise.

Also, keep track of any due dates looming over your town. The Star-Ledger and other large news organizations often will run stories about new state laws that affect local government, like the new fingerprinting requirement for school board members or the anti-bullying initiative that took effect in September 2011. If such a law

gets passed, call the state agency involved and find out when local governments have to begin complying with the law and whether there's a deadline for them to file any reports to Trenton. Mark these dates on your calendar. Usually they will be months later, when everyone has forgotten about the law. By keeping the calendar, you can check to see what your town has done to comply. Often that might involve compiling reports or information that make interesting reading for residents.

Also, keep track of as many state-imposed deadlines as possible. The exact details of such mandates will vary from town to town. Keep your ears and eyes open for them. For example, if your town gets transitional aid from the state, then it has an agreement in place with the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs (DCA) stipulating terms and conditions under which it gets the state aid. (This agreement would be one of those documents you've incorporated into your above-mentioned library.) Among the terms in those transitional aid agreements is one that requires towns to submit a plan to the state on how they expect to become financially self-sufficient so they will no longer need transitional aid. Options outlined in such plans often include possibilities like layoffs, service cuts, fee increases. Nobody in city hall is going to announce that such a plan was sent to Trenton. But a reporter who keeps a tight calendar will anticipate it and ask for it. The city may not be cooperative in releasing such a plan, so file an OPRA request. Better yet, ask the DCA's press office for a copy. They're professionals who know what's supposed to be made public and frequently will provide documents upon request that local officials want kept quiet.

To keep abreast of any other DCA actions that are relevant to your town, sign up to be on DCA's weekly email newsletter which announces state laws, timelines, grant awards and guidelines: <http://www.state.nj.us/dca/divisions/digs/uptodate/digsemailnews.html>

- e) Start developing a core of news sources. In the hyperlocal world, you should consider everyone in town a potential news source. Engage everyone as much as possible. Explain that you're trying to cover their town as accurately, fairly and comprehensively as possible. Invite them to contact you by phone or email about

potential news stories. Let them know you're interested in the entire spectrum of news – what people might perceive as the positive stories (such as a human interest piece about someone from town who has achieved something), what people might perceive as the negative (like the allegation that a top official rented the deluxe suite at a Manhattan hotel and dined on lobster and caviar while attending a conference on government cost-cutting) and stories that seem neutral (such as the construction of an addition to the elementary school).

When people begin reaching out to you, respond to them as soon as possible. Respond to everyone. Be honest with everyone. If someone suggests you cover an event that your schedule won't accommodate, tell them so. Apologize for being unable to cover it. Ask them to let you know about the next event. Otherwise, if you give someone the false impression that you'll cover something you can't, you'll likely alienate and lose that potential source.

Who should you seek as sources? The obvious choices are elected and appointed government officials, representatives of the various civic and community groups in the town, the heads of the various government employee unions, the townspeople who regularly attend the local government meetings, and the local political leaders who may be somewhat behind the scenes like the chairs of the Democratic and Republican parties.

Also, get to know as many people within the police department as possible. Cops always seem to know what's going on in town more than anyone else. Obviously, develop a relationship with whichever officer serves as the media contact or public information officer. But don't stop there. Try to get to know the police chief, the head of the town's police unions (usually separate ones for superior officers and rank-and-file members), the head of the detective squad, the officer who works with the Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) program or the Police Athletic League (PAL). The availability and access of these other officers varies from town to town. You won't have much luck saying you want to meet the chief to develop him or her as a source. You need a better strategy than that. You could say you have questions about the budget, or about some new state law enforcement program. Find an issue like that with relevance to

your town, maybe something as simple as a federal grant to buy body armor, and say you'd like to get the chief's input. That could be the start of a relationship that builds over time.

One time-honored newspaper technique for developing sources is to write some feature stories that will put you in contact with people who normally may not want to talk to you. For example, if there's a DARE graduation in your town, instead of posting a few sentences about it, which is really what it is worth in terms of news coverage, plan on doing a full-length feature. Interview the police chief, the school principal, the superintendent of schools, the school board president and the rank-and-file cops who work on the program. Your chances of initiating contact and building a relationship with these people are much better if your first phone call to them is about what they perceive as a positive story than if you are calling about a scandal. In truth, even after you do the softball story, some of them will ignore your calls on more substantive issues. That's just the reality of the news business. But others will become more accessible to you after that initial interaction and develop into sources.

Here are a few more source tips:

- If you do an extended interview with someone for a story, make sure you include in that story either a direct quotation or a paraphrased section attributed by name to that person. Otherwise, that source will feel as if he or she has wasted his time talking to you and may not be as willing to do it again.
- If a new source says he or she wants to go off the record on something, make sure you discuss what those ground rules mean to the two of you before you proceed. Journalism trade publications have done articles on the various shades of meaning of the term "off-the-record" and unless you and your source are on the same page about what your mutual interpretation of the phrase is, you risk alienating the source.
- As you start out, call every member of the city council on every city government related story and whenever possible quote all of them who respond. That will establish your credibility as being fair and unbiased. The worst thing you could do is have one official you go to for most of your

quotes, even if that official is the only one who is intelligent and articulate, because you soon will be perceived as that official's mouthpiece.

- Get to know the public information/press officers at the state agencies that have the most dealings with local news – such as the Department of Community Affairs, the Department of Education, and the Department of Environmental Protection. Their cooperation is vital to solid news coverage of municipalities because of their agencies' regulatory roles. Also, get to know some of the appropriate county government officials as well.
- Finally, there's no paint-by-numbers process for developing confidential sources who will tip you off to the scandalous happenings behind the scenes. Those relationships develop in many different ways. You don't want to be too aggressive searching such sources out. If you go around saying to everyone you meet: "Hey got any good dirt on the mayor?" then you're going to end up alienating many people. Word will get back to the mayor who will cut you off and you'll develop a reputation as scandal-monger. Ask less pejorative questions, like, "Anything else going on I should know about?" or "What's new at city hall?"

In many ways, the best way to find valuable confidential sources is to follow this simple rule: "Don't look for them, let them find you." And the best way to help them find you is to make sure your coverage is fearless. If all you write are softball features, folks with inside information will not consider tipping you off about something. But as you show a willingness to take on controversial subject matter and to expose questionable practices, sources will seek you out as a potential conduit for bringing what they perceive as misconduct to light.

- f) Build a file of photos of key people and places in your town. Many municipal government websites will include them, and you're able to use those photos as part of the public domain. But go beyond the material on the website.
- g) Similar to the photo file, accumulate useful video. Some

examples are footage from municipal election debates, inaugural speeches and budget presentations. Focus on video that contains elected officials making some substantive statements about issues that impact their constituents and your readers/viewers.

But please don't make the mistake that some sites do – they simply present the video of an event instead of writing a news story. What good is that to anyone? As journalists, we're supposed to provide context. We emphasize what's most important. By simply providing video, we're abdicating that responsibility. For example in his budget speech, the mayor may spend 28 minutes bragging about city programs and only mention at the end in the last two minutes that there will layoffs and a tax increase this year. Video won't tell that story accurately.

Covering Municipal Government

The Municipal Council or Committee Meetings

Attending these should be at the core of your coverage. They come in dual sets: First, there's what officials call a workshop or agenda session. Second, there's the meeting at which they take formal action, which many places call the business or regular meeting. Usually, the workshop or agenda meeting will be held a week before the business meeting. In theory, the workshop meeting is when officials hash out issues, ask questions, debate and dissect a proposed ordinance or resolution. In many places, these sessions provide as much -- if not more -- useful information than the actual formal meetings. Go to them, even if the officials in your town don't talk much. This will provide a blueprint for the business to be voted upon at the upcoming formal meeting.

The Faulkner Act

To some degree, this falls under "Know the Rules." In New Jersey, there's a law called the Faulkner Act. It has nothing to do with an acclaimed southern author who tended to write in rather long sentences. The Faulkner Act outlines four optional forms of government available to New Jersey municipalities: Mayor-Council, Council-Manager, Small Municipality Plan, Mayor-Council-Administrator. Many of New Jersey's largest cities have adopted one of these forms. (See appendix for a list of all available forms of municipal government) Each option delegates somewhat differently the powers and responsibilities for government functions. This, in turn, will dictate to some degree how the council or committee meetings are run and who has the power to make key decisions such as appointments or approval of contracts. Under the common mayor-council form, for example, the mayor's staff will propose resolutions on contracts that must be approved by the city council through a resolution. In a Town Committee form of government, however, the mayor is simply a figure head with little or no authority and decisions are made by a committee of the whole.

Get the documents

The City of Paterson, for example, provides the press with copies of almost all resolutions and ordinances scheduled for possible discussion at the agenda meeting. These are a valuable tool. Ask

the clerk in your town to provide a similar packet. (*You're entitled to these documents as soon as they come up for discussion at the meeting.) The vague headings about resolutions and ordinances listed on a meeting agenda never tell the full story of what's involved. That's why you need the actual ordinances and resolutions. In many instances, these will contain a general description of why the town is taking the particular action and specifics of what's being done. Even if every official refuses to comment on an issue, the resolution or ordinance should provide enough information to write a news story. To cover a town well, it's essential to get these documents and to read them. Add copies of crucial ones to your library.

In some cases, the resolution or ordinance will refer to a report, a study, a contract, or an agreement that's being accepted, approved or cited by the governing body. In the most transparent towns, said document will already be attached to the resolution or ordinance. But often that's not the case. Be sure to ask for them and if denied file an OPRA request. Documents cited within resolutions and ordinances are part of the public record and the press is entitled to get them. Often they provide the real meat for a news story – the size and breakdown of a severance package being given to a retiring administrator, the concessions made to a labor union, the accommodations made to the shopping mall developer.

Closed sessions

The Open Public Meetings Act, often referred to as the "Sunshine Law", allows exemptions for governing bodies to meet behind closed doors to discuss certain confidential issues, including pending lawsuits, labor negotiations, security issues and matters involving the job performance of specific municipal employees.

Before going into closed session, the governing body must say which exemption is the reason for the closed session. Based on court rulings, they must be fairly specific, as well. For example, they cannot simply say they are discussing possible litigation. The precedent is they must make public the exact lawsuit or issue that may result in litigation that they are going to discuss. Often, that information won't be included on the agenda and will only be revealed if requested. But that information will give a good reporter a lead on a story. Now that newspapers no longer assign court

reporters to check every lawsuit filed at the county courthouse, newsworthy litigation often slips between the cracks. The closed sessions at town council meetings provide a way for a reporter to monitor the city's legal issues. Usually, the stories that come from this are narrow in scope, like a lawsuit filed by a parent whose child broke a leg on a defective swing set in a city playground. But they are newsworthy stories nonetheless. And every now and then closed sessions disclose litigation about blockbuster issues. In Paterson, that's how PatersonPress.com found out about a lawsuit filed by a woman who said a city cop forced her to have sex while she was in his custody.

Another key point about closed sessions: Ask council members about them the next day. Many will refuse to comment, citing the legal situation. But some will talk on background or off-the-record and provide important information or insights on the issue. Moreover, a crafty reporter can get officials who are reluctant to discuss a specific lawsuit to talk about the general issues instead. For example: How old is the playground equipment? How often does it get inspected? Has the recreation department laid off members of its maintenance staff?

Finally, you should know that the minutes of closed sessions are supposed to be made available to the public once the issue being discussed is resolved. So, for example, after the city approved a new contract for its public works employee union, it has to make public minutes of the city council's closed discussions on the contract. Going back and getting the minutes might reveal newsworthy information about officials' viewpoints or strategy on a labor contract.

The Public Comment Portion

Try to be present for this as often as possible. The substance and conduct of these sessions varies dramatically from town to town. There's usually a hard-core group of gadflies who attend meeting after meeting and talk about the same issue time after time. It's easy to develop a journalistic approach of ignoring what they have to say because nothing ever seems to get done about it. But beware of that pitfall. The gadflies offer a perspective that's different from that of municipal officials. If they comment on an issue that you plan on

writing about, it's good journalistic practice to include some of their quotations.

More importantly, stay alert for public comments by people who normally don't attend municipal meetings. The issues they come to speak about often provide material for hyperlocal new stories: the parent upset because police are doing a bad job keeping drug dealers from the local basketball courts, the resident whose home was inundated with waste when a municipal sewer pipe burst, the teacher who says an intersection near the elementary school needs a traffic light. Part of our role as hyperlocal media is to provide a platform where such quality of life issues can be examined and exposed and where genuine citizen voices can be heard.

Step-by-Step Guide for Key Stories

Certain stories arise on an annual basis. They are part of the journalistic routine. But they should not be treated as routine stories. Each is vital to fulfilling our First Amendment role and we should approach them with investigative vigor. The following sections will outline the steps that reporters should take on these recurring stories to ensure the public is being best served.

The Municipal Reorganization Meeting:

1) Advance preparation (Start several weeks in advance):

- Ask the municipal clerk for several things: a) A copy of the agenda from the previous year's reorganization meeting. b) Copies of all resolutions from the previous year's reorganization meeting that authorized the hiring of consultants. c) A list of all municipal positions -- including those on municipal boards and committees -- that are due for reappointment at the start of the new municipal year. Make sure you get the names of the people currently in those positions. d) Ask for a lists of which council members are assigned to which committees.
- Get the minutes of the previous year's reorganization meeting.
- Ask the clerk for copies of any speeches the mayor or other officials gave at the previous year's meeting. If the clerk doesn't have copies of the speeches, check the minutes of the meeting. The speeches may have been included in the minutes.

2) Checking the consultants:

- Read the previous year's resolutions for hiring consultants such as an engineering firm, labor counsel, or auditor. They will include "not to exceed" amounts setting the municipality's limit on how much it was willing to spend on that service at the outset of the contract. Take note of all those figures.
- Next, check with the municipal finance office for the total amount of year-to-date payments that have been made to

each of those various consultants.

- Now compare the limits imposed on the consultants and what they actually were paid.
- If the payment exceeds the original limit, you have a story. Next, you must do some more fact-finding to determine if it's a minor story or a major story.
- For a municipality to pay a consultant more money than what's listed in the not-to-exceed amount in the reorganization meeting contract, one of two things should have happened. The council approved an amendment to the original contract, or the council gave the same vendor another contract for some other duties. Ask the clerk for copies of any resolutions involving contracts for that consultant. (You can OPRA these if the clerk gives you a hard time.)
- If no other resolutions exist, you have a major story that grows in magnitude depending on the size of the discrepancy: "Town Pays Consultant Thousands More Dollars Than Amount Authorized."
- If amendments exist, calculate the difference in the amounts. It's still a pretty good story: "Town Pays Consultant Thousands More Dollars Than Originally Planned." Ask municipal officials for the explanations on why more work was needed. The magnitude of this version of the story depends on the plausibility of the town's explanation for the added work. If a hurricane hit and the consultant was given an amended contract to evaluate damaged sewers that seems fairly legitimate and minimizes the impact of the story. If officials decided two-thirds of the way into the year that they needed to double the size of the contract to have the consultant conduct the municipality's bi-annual sewer inspections, that's more questionable. Something like bi-annual inspections should have been anticipated.
- One more step on consultants' contracts. Check the campaign finance reports that must be filed with the New

Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission (ELEC). They are available online on the ELEC website or in hard copy at the county clerk's office. Check to see if any of the consultants hired at the previous year's reorganization meeting contributed money to the various campaign funds for the mayor, council members, or municipal committee for the political party that happens to be in power in the municipal government.

3) Last year's speeches.

This is another important step that should be taken in preparation for covering a municipal reorganization meeting. Once you get copies of the speech, or meeting minutes that summarize them if the speeches themselves are not available, go through the speeches to find out exactly what local officials said they would do. Then find out what progress, if any, they made on those issues.

Here are some ways to approach writing about last year's speech:

- Did the official promise or propose any new services or programs? If so, has the official delivered on that promise? Don't just ask the official who made the speech. Ask other elected officials in town, and relevant interest groups and activists. Research the facts.
- If the program has been launched, then find out how much it has cost. Were new employees hired, new supplies or equipment purchased, were consultants retained? Moreover, were municipal resources diverted from other programs? Finally, find out how many people are using or being served by the new program.
- If the program/service has not been launched, why not? Was it fiscal constraints, political opposition or other factors? What steps were taken to examine the possibility of launching the program/service? Were any consultants hired to study the official's proposal? How much was spent on that? Was the consultant a political contributor?
- What did the official say about taxes and municipal spending? Sometimes, they include specific pledges on

these topics, which makes the task of measuring whether they made good on their speeches easy.

But after our first President Bush told the nation to read his lips and ended up raising taxes anyway, most political figures are smart enough not to make any sweeping pronouncements in this regard. Chances are the official used vague language, such as “hold the line” when talking about taxes or spending. Still, good reporters should not allow officials’ use of vague language to get them off the hook.

First, contact the official himself/herself, read back that passage of the speech and ask for five specific programs or initiatives by which that goal was pursued. Grill the official about whatever programs or initiatives are listed: When did it start? How was it implemented? Exactly what savings did it produce? Ask for details, details and more details. The facts the official provides in response to these questions would make a good advance story. If the official can’t provide details and facts, then that makes a very good story: “The mayor says he wanted to cut municipal spending by merging the city emergency medical technician unit with the fire department. The mayor said the merger was one of the ways he planned to make good on his promise last year to “hold the line on taxes.” But a year later, the mayor acknowledges that he has not yet started the merger initiative. The city has yet to complete a cost analysis of the plan, has not set a deadline for when one would be done and is not sure whether a plan would be ready in time to be incorporated in this year’s budget.”

A second way to approach vague cost-cutting promises would be to read the quotes to other elected officials in the city and ask them if they know of any initiatives or programs the mayor has launched to fulfill the goal. If they say they do, grill them on the details and status of the program, just as you would grill the official who made the speech. Also, ask the officials whether they thought the initiatives they cited represented a fulfillment of the promise to “hold the line.”

If the other officials say they don’t know of any such initiatives, there’s the story: “Despite the mayor’s pledge last year to hold the line on taxes, none (or most or several) of the township council members could cite any specific programs that the mayor has enacted to achieve his fiscal goal.”

Finally, the best way to evaluate an official's vague talk of holding the line on taxes is to use the facts. Compare the official's words with the numbers. Check the budget that followed the speech months afterwards. Did overall spending rise or fall compared to the previous year? Did the tax levy rise or fall compared to the previous year? That could give you a story such as this: "At his inaugural a year ago, the mayor said he would 'hold the line on borough spending.' But the budget the borough adopted three months after the mayor made that speech included an eight-percent increase in borough spending and a five-percent rise in the tax levy."

4) The Meeting Itself

If you've done the preparation and the advance reporting discussed above, then you'll have plenty of useful background information from which to launch your coverage.

Start by reviewing the new contracts for the various consultants.

Is the town hiring the same attorney, engineering firm, auditor, etc? If the names are all the same, that might not sound very newsworthy. But you should check the NJ ELEC campaign contribution reports to see whether these firms, their principals, or their employees made campaign contributions to the party that's in power. If they have donated political funds, the information will improve what previously seemed a humdrum story into something more interesting: "The town council at its reorganization meeting renewed contracts with five municipal consultants who last year donated more than \$63,000 to the mayor's re-election fund." If the town has adopted a pay-to-play reform law ordinance, check the consultant's contributions against the maximum amount permitted. Violations can result in significant stories.

Another factor to consider if the town is rehiring its consultants is their job performance the previous year. This is more challenging because the nature of the consultants' work often does not lend itself to objective criteria on which to evaluate their performance. But for each consultant with a renewed contract, consider their body of work during the previous year. What employee contracts did the law firm that handles labor negotiations help settle? What reports or studies did the engineering firm do? What controversies

did consultants end up involved in? Here are some hypothetical stories you could write based on consultants' track records: "The borough council has rehired the law firm that handled negotiations on the unpopular new police union contract that provided officers with 17-percent raises over three years." Or: "The engineering firm that helped craft the zoning changes that now allow six-story buildings in the downtown area had its contract renewed." Or: "The city has rehired the municipal attorney who conducted the disciplinary hearings last year that cleared six public works employees of allegations that they used borough equipment to fix their own houses."

Finally, if the town is rehiring the same consultants, compare the dollar-figure limits on their contracts to what was set and paid the previous year. If there's an increase or decrease, that's worth asking about. Is the consultant performing more or fewer services? Or is the consultant's hourly rate going up or down? The size of the increase or decrease will dictate whether this information is worth two paragraphs in the general story about the reorganization or a whole separate story itself. Don't just focus on the raw numbers. Look at the percentage change as well. A \$15,000 increase on a \$200,000 annual contract for an engineering firm is much different from a \$15,000 increase on a \$30,000 contract.

Check the agenda for appointments to various municipal boards and compare it against the list of pending openings that you got from the clerk in advance of the reorganization meeting.

Look for instances in which someone new has been appointed to a position. In the hyperlocal world, each one of those changes is a story. In some cases it may be a brief story of five paragraphs, but that's still an online story. Ask at least two people for an explanation about each instance in which the new appointee represents a change – someone from the political party in power and someone from the party that's not in power. It's also a good idea to reach out to the person who is being replaced and the person who is moving into the position. But frankly, you may not have time to do that for every appointment. Make the extra effort to contact the appointee and the person being removed in instances in which you have an indication there may be more to the story than what is on the

surface.

Posting brief news items on new appointments that don't seem controversial is good journalistic practice for two reasons. First, municipal boards make decisions that affect the public in tangible ways: development decisions, open space decisions, rent increases, the preservation of historic buildings, etc. The public ought to know when there's a change in these boards' memberships. Secondly, although an appointment may seem simple and straightforward to you or to the two officials whom you ask about it, someone in the reading public may know something about the person that adds a new layer to the story. Perhaps there's something in the appointee's background that might raise questions about his or her fitness for the position. Someone may read your news brief, pick up the phone and say, "Did you know..."

For all appointments, you should ask for the appointees' resumes and include a reasonable amount of that information in the story. Normally, municipal clerks are willing to hand over resumes upon request. By state law, clerks must provide, but may redact private contact information to protect privacy. Still, some may give you a hard time. If that happens, remind the clerk of the state law and that this is a public appointment and the public is entitled to know the appointee's background. If the clerk still resists, file an OPRA request, post a story about the resume when you get it, and in that story say the clerk refused an initial request for the resume and was only willing to provide it through an OPRA request. (Also, in such an instance, give the resume a decent amount of due diligence. The clerk's refusal may have stemmed from another municipal department.)

By the way, you might run into an instance in which the clerk says the municipality does not have the person's resume. Ask the mayor and council president about that. If they confirm what the clerk has said, ask them on what basis they decided to appoint someone to the board without first reviewing the person's resume. Ask if the municipality received resumes from appointees for other positions. If the municipality doesn't get resumes from its appointees, that's a story. If the municipality asks some for resumes and not others, that inconsistency is a story.

You should also check you advance list of impending appointments against the list of actual appointments to see if any positions were left out. For example, if the term for a particular member of the planning board has run out and that person isn't being reappointed to another full term, or replaced, there's probably a story behind that. If you have time, you can talk to the various people involved to find out what's happened. Or, you can write a brief item stating the basic facts of the situation and then do a more in-depth examination afterwards. (By posting a brief item, you may prompt someone with inside information on the situation to contact you and clue you in.)

Finally, get a copy of the town's "Directory of boards and commissions" and see if there are any completely vacant or inactive boards or commissions that would be of value to the town if they were functioning. For example, you might look at the directory and see that in the 1980's the city council created a Youth Commission, but is has not appointed anyone to it in more than 15 years. You can interview organizations or individuals about whether there is still a need for a Youth Commission. In other cases, inactive boards may be the reason grant opportunities were missed in areas such as open space or affordable housing.

Get speeches by the mayor, or any other officials.

Ask them for a copy, which you will save and use as a reference point for your ongoing coverage. You may write about the speech the next day, but not cover every point the official made in your story. By having a copy, you give yourself the opportunity to use material from the speech over the course of the year.

Interview the speechmaker afterwards to flesh out the person's words. Usually, such speeches are filled with sweeping generalities. A good reporter attempts to get the speechmaker to be more specific. Remember, we're not stenographers. If the speechmaker talks about new programs, services, initiatives, ask the person to provide:

- A timeframe on when it might be accomplished.
- Cost estimates and an explanation of how the money would be raised to cover said costs.

- Information on what regulatory steps need to be taken. Which municipal, county, state or federal entities would have to sign-off on it.
- A description/explanation of how the speechmaker determined there was a need for the initiative. Was there a study done? Did it come up at a community meeting? A suggestion from a constituent?

If the speechmaker doesn't have answers, that's something you should include in your story: "The mayor said he wanted to increase recreation opportunities in the town by building a new swimming pool. But the mayor offered few details on how that would happen. The mayor said he was not sure how long the project would take or how much it would cost." With those two extra sentences, you have taken political rhetoric and exposed it for what it is.

Also, sometimes the most telling thing about a speech is what an official is not talking about. For example, if the municipality the previous year had a large tax increase, the mayor might not want to mention that in his speech. But you should bring it up in your interview afterwards. You shouldn't ask about last year's hike. That's old news. What you ought to ask is what specific steps are being taken to avoid another tax increase in the upcoming year.

Perhaps there wasn't a tax increase in your town, but chances are there was some controversial issue that the speechmaker would find too unpleasant to mention in his or her oration. Bring it up in your interview and craft your questions in such a way that you are asking for the speechmaker's plans to address the situation or prevent it from happening again.

Ask for a copy of the committee assignments for the previous year as well as the new list for the upcoming year.

Usually at reorganization meetings, council members will be assigned to various subcommittees formed to address local issues. Normally, there might be committees on the budget or finance, public safety, planning, public works, etc. Pay particular attention to the chairmanships and changes in those roles. Often, there are few, if any changes. But if someone new is becoming chairman of

the budget committee, that's worth noting. Again, it might only be a brief news story. But it could be a bigger story depending on what happened with the budget the previous year, what the former chairman has to say about being replaced and what the person doing the appointments has to say about the reason for the change.

In some towns, these committee assignments are made at the reorganization meeting in the form of a resolution approved by the council. In other instances, the assignments are done by the council president after the meeting.

The selection of the new council president is worth writing about as part of your coverage of political and governmental leadership.

In many places, these positions are handled through an informal rotation. Or the same two people fill the positions year after year. If that's the case, there's not much to do in this regard. But there are plenty of municipalities where the largely ceremonial president and vice president positions are the objects of much behind-the-scenes political jockeying and worth writing about.

Obviously, when the outcome of a general election changes the majority party or faction on a council, there's likely to be corresponding change in council president. But sometimes, changes occur for other reasons. In any case, it's always good to ask about the impending choice of the council presidency a few days in advance of the reorganization. As in most cases, when it comes to local government, you do your readers much more of a service letting them know about an impending change before it happens, when they still have an opportunity to voice their opinions and to influence their public servants, than simply to write about it when it's a fait accompli.

School Board Reorganization Meeting

Most New Jersey towns hold these in the spring after their April school elections. As of 2012, some school districts have switched their elections to November and the reorganization will be held then.

For the most part, approach the school reorganization with the same mindset described above for municipal council reorganization. Here's a quick outline of the steps you should take:

- a) Again, get the information on the contracts awarded to the various consultants from the previous year's reorganization meeting. Check with the school business office on how much the consultants ultimately were paid. Then compare that information with the "not to exceed" dollar figures in the new contracts approved at the reorganization. Also, see if any of the contracts changed hands and find out why. In most school districts, the records custodian is the school business administrator/secretary. First, double-check to ensure that this is the case in your town and if so, direct any OPRA requests to their attention.
- b) Review speeches from previous year's reorganization meeting (If school board business administrator/secretary doesn't have them, ask for the minutes of the reorganization, which may have the speeches in their entirety or may at least provide a summary of them.) Again, compare what the speechmakers promised with what actually happened during the school year.
- c) Report on the selection of the school board president. As with municipal councils, the approach towards this position varies from town to town. In some places, the same person holds the post year after year. In others there's an informal rotation system. Neither of those situations is big news. But there are towns where the political dynamic on a school board is more fluid and in these places the annual selection of the school board president becomes more newsworthy. Whoever gets picked to be president, interview that person about goals for the upcoming year. Such an interview works best if the reporter knows the key issues in the school district and asks specific questions about those issues. Don't settle for vague responses from the official. Remember, this is someone who was elected by the public, or appointed by municipal officials, and as a result must be accountable to the public.
- d) Find out about any changes in subcommittee assignments for the board members, especially chairmanships.

The Municipal Budget

Covering the municipal budget is the most important thing any reporter covering any municipality does. It's the quintessential exercise in accountability. Too many reporters, even people who have been doing the job for years, approach budgets with disinterest or apprehension. It's a task they try to fulfill by writing one or two stories largely based on what officials tell them and they try to move on. My gosh, they think, who can make sense of all those numbers? There's nothing dramatic about a budget. WRONG!

Thanks to "All the President's Men," the phrase "follow the money" has become a journalistic cliché. But it's also the essence of good investigative reporting. Budget coverage is the perfect opportunity for following the money.

The following is designed to provide a step-by-step approach to parsing the municipal budget in a way that should help you write more than a dozen stories off your budget.

First, an overview of the process:

Introduction: The municipal council must "introduce" its budget. This basically means they vote on a preliminary document that gets sent to the NJ Department of Community Affairs (DCA) for review. In some instances, particularly in the most fiscally stable municipalities, the introduced version is fairly close to what local officials intend to adopt. In places that are struggling financially, the introduced version is a very rough draft that will undergo some significant changes before the final version is ready.

In either instance, you ought to write a story about the introduced budget. As soon as the introduction vote is taken, ask for a copy. Under state law, this is a public document. Sometimes, officials will refuse and say you can get a copy of the budget that will be officially advertised in the local paper. Don't accept that response. It will be weeks before the budget gets advertised and by then you should have written several stories about it. Ask the municipal attorney to intervene. If the attorney isn't willing to do that, file an OPRA request. Also, simply contact the DCA press office at 609-292-6055 and ask for a copy of the introduced budget (which municipalities

generally send to Trenton within days of the introduction vote).

Here are some basic facts you should include in your budget introduction story:

- Overall size of the budget and how it compares to last year's figure.
- Size of the municipal tax levy and how it compares to last year's levy. The tax levy is the total amount of local property taxes to be used as revenue in the budget.
- Date, time and place of the public hearing on the budget.
- List of which departments and line items had the biggest increases or decreases and officials' explanation for those changes. (This will be discussed in more detail further down in this section.)

Departmental budget hearings: Depending on the municipality, these may happen before or after the budget is introduced. In either case, advance notices about the sessions must be advertised and posted in town hall. In this step, the municipal council goes through the individual line items of the various municipal departments. At these hearings, you are entitled to see the same line-item break down that the council members are reviewing. Sometimes you'll run into resistance from local finance officials who don't want to hand this over. Again, go to the attorney and protest. (You can also file an OPRA request for them, but because of the time-lag in getting documents through OPRA, you may not get them in time for the hearing.)

Attend these departmental hearings. Sometimes, they can be tedious. But if your municipal council has a few independent thinkers, the questions they ask and the issues they raise during the departmental hearings will provide the basis for solid news stories about municipal finances and provide a better understanding of the way your local government operates.

Public hearing: This is always a good opportunity to ensure your news coverage includes the voice of the people. Sometimes no one from the public shows up at these sessions. Sometimes the council

meeting space is standing-room-only. That depends on the stability of the local government's finances and whether there is a large tax increase proposed.

It's always a good idea to quote as many people as possible who speak at a public budget hearing. If most of them are concerned about the same fiscal issue, then that makes organizing your story easy and its focus more concentrated. If their comments, questions and complaints cover a wide variety of topics, then your story will have to jump around along with the public's variety of interests.

DCA Approval/Input: In many municipalities, this is a mere formality. In those places with fiscal problems, the process of getting DCA approval becomes more newsworthy. A few weeks after the budget gets introduced, ask the municipal finance officer if DCA has signed off on it. Call the DCA press office and ask the same question. If DCA hasn't signed off yet, ask the DCA press office to send you any letters from DCA to the municipality about the introduced budget. If there are problems with the budget, the DCA letter will explain them. Write a story about the content of these letters.

Adoption: Sometimes this is done on the same night that the municipality holds the public hearing, right after the public has its say. In that case, it all becomes part of one story. The adoption is the council's final vote on the budget. Sometimes, the members will make comments to preface their votes. If those comments are substantive, use them. But if they speak in generalities that do not address the issues involved in the budget (such things as a tax increase, service cuts, layoffs or the sale of an asset for one-time income), interview the council members afterwards, especially the council president and finance/budget committee chairman, and ask them very specific questions about the key issues in the budget.

Budget Stories That Can Be done Between Introduction and Adoption

A good reporter puts a microscope to the budget during this time period, reporting as much information about the budget as possible to keep the public informed. In some instances, there's enough material to write a dozen or more stories. In other cases, finding two or three can be a challenge.

Always attempt to interview the municipal official who directly prepares the budget. It'll be the finance director or budget director. They tend to be more forthcoming than elected officials are and more knowledgeable. If that person doesn't return your messages, ask the mayor's permission and cooperation for such an interview. If the mayor refuses to cooperate, then at some point in one of your subsequent budget stories include a couple sentences that read something like this: "Finance Director John Smith, who prepared the budget, did not respond to three attempts to interview him about municipal finances. Mayor Bill Jones would not make Smith, whose salary is \$135,000, available to the press to discuss the budget." (You'll know the salary by getting that information as part of your routine data collection described above.) If the mayor refuses to make the budget official available for an interview, then grill the mayor (something you should do anyway even if the budget official talks to you) as well as the council president and finance chairman.

Ask about some basic things, each of which can be a story on its own depending on the substance:

Jobs :

Does the budget include any layoffs, elimination of vacant positions, or the addition of new jobs to the municipal payroll? If the answer to any of these questions is yes, ask for details. Often, in the case of layoffs, the local officials will say they can't talk about details because it involves personnel issues. Don't let them off the hook. Ask them which municipal departments or divisions will be getting the layoffs and how many people would be affected.

If they are still not forthcoming, contact the press office at the New Jersey Civil Service Commission. Any municipalities that plan to lay off workers must submit their specific layoff plans to the Commission. The Civil Service Commission will confirm whether or not it has received a layoff plan from a particular municipality, and once the commission has signed off on the layoffs, it will confirm the number of jobs involved and sometimes the types of jobs. Once you have that information, you can sometime revisit municipal officials who had been tight-lipped and use the Civil Service Commission input to crowbar more information about the layoffs out of them.

One more thing, contact the relevant labor unions and ask them about layoffs and budget impact. It's always a good idea to get to know the presidents of the Policemen's Benevolent Association and other municipal employee unions BEFORE you need their cooperation on a high-profile issue. This way those folks have a level of comfort in dealing with you. One way to accomplish that is to write a community feature about a legitimate union event, such as a Christmas toy drive, which is something many municipal unions do. Establishing good lines of communications with union leaders tends to prove fruitful for the press.

Services:

Ask if the budget provides money for any new or expanded services, or calls for the elimination or reduction of any existing services. This is an inquiry for which you may want to broaden the pool of people whom you interview. Ask each council members if any of these changes are taking place within the departments under their oversight (committee assignments discussed above). Also call cooperative department heads.

If new programs are being added, ask officials how they are paying for them and whether grants are involved. There's something some local finance officials call the "funding-cliff." This is when a municipality gets money from the federal or state government through a grant with a limited duration, such as those that provide cities with money to hire police officers or firefighters. The grants cover the cost of the program or employees' salaries for a few years. But then the municipality falls off the cliff. The grant runs out and then municipal officials must decide whether to pick up the tab with local funds, or eliminate the program and/or lay off the employees hired under it.

Municipal officials like to make announcements about new programs being started with such grants. Good reporters will provide their readers with a full picture of the fiscal ramifications.

One-time revenue infusions:

Ask the budget officer, mayor and finance chairman if the budget uses revenue from any property sales and if so, how much and what properties. This can be a precarious budgeting maneuver. In an ideal

situation, a budget is balanced by having reliable and recurring revenue streams in place, such as property taxes and municipal fees, pay for municipal services. When the revenue and expenses don't balance out, officials in some towns resort to selling off assets- a stopgap measure. That practice is especially common when officials want to avert a tax increase in the budget preceding an important election for the people in power. The problem that usually arises is that the taxes then go up in the following year, after the election, because the municipality no longer has the assets to sell. The sale merely postponed the inevitable until after an election.

Good reporters expose this practice before it happens so the public and voters know what to expect. In pre-election years, it's always good to get key officials to say whether they're doing this early in the budget process.

If a municipality is selling off land or public buildings, ask officials whether they have a plan to generate new or increased revenue in the following fiscal year to make up for the loss of the one-time infusion of money. They may try to get by with a vague "we're looking at some things." Don't accept such generalities. That's not a plan. Point out to them they are considering selling off a very specific asset this year and taxpayers are entitled to know the specifics of how they plan to compensate for that the following year. You should also ask whether they may have to cut services or lay off workers in the following year to make up for the loss of the non-recurring revenue of the asset sale. Include their responses about what they'll do next year when you write about the proposed sale of an asset. By putting them on the record this year about their one-shot budget balancing move, you make it much easier to hold them accountable next year if they raise taxes or eliminate programs.

Taxes:

This obviously is the issue that concerns most readers when they read budget stories. That's why it's important for us to be thorough in coverage and explanation. There are three ways to measure taxes in a municipality. Chances are the officials in power will highlight the one that presents the most positive picture of the municipal finances. Our job is to present the most comprehensive and accurate picture.

First, there's the municipal tax levy, which, as stated previously, is the total amount of property taxes to be collected to support the municipal budget. In 99-percent of New Jersey municipalities, the tax levy is the main revenue source. It's an absolute number that can be compared quite easily with the previous year's levy. As a general rule of thumb, the levy rises to cover rising costs, and vice versa.

(It's important to note that budget caps were imposed on New Jersey municipalities in recent years by state legislation. However, the tax levy may increase by slightly more than what the cap prescribes because certain expenditures – those that state officials have deemed to be outside the control of municipal officials - are considered "outside the cap." The cap only covers expenditures controlled by local government, such as employee salaries and operating expenses.)

A second way to measure taxes is the municipal rate – the amount of money property owners must pay in taxes per \$100 of assessed value on their properties. To say the tax rate will rise by six cents to \$2.37 per \$100 of assessed value doesn't provide the most meaningful explanation for readers. You don't want to use that piece of information on its own. Over the years, New Jersey's municipal officials, and news reporters, have described changes in the tax rate in terms of the impact on a home at the municipality's average assessment. It reads something like this: "Taxes on a \$300,000 home, which is the average assessment in the town, would rise by \$85 per year, up to \$7,990, under the proposed budget."

There's one bugaboo about using the tax rate to describe the fiscal impact of a budget without also including information about the tax levy. The rate is calculated by dividing the tax levy among all the taxable property in the municipality. If the amount of taxable property (also known as ratables) suddenly surges, which can happen through the completion of some major new developments, then the tax rate may go down even though the total amount of municipal taxes being collected increases. Under such a scenario, a story proclaiming a tax cut fails to hold municipal officials accountable for the increase in total collections.

In fairness, it's reasonable to expect some new developments, depending on their size and nature, to necessitate some sort of

increase in some municipal spending, and as a result an increase in the tax levy. For example, a massive new housing development might require the hiring of two extra police officers, the purchase of a new public works truck, the construction of additional sewer lines, etc . (Not to mention the need for an addition to the local elementary school, which takes us into a whole different budget.)

During bad real estate cycles or in economically depressed areas, the value of the total taxable property may decrease, especially when large numbers of property owners successfully file tax appeals to have their assessments lowered. For example, in Paterson in 2011, the total amount of ratables went down by \$266 million through tax appeals. As a result, even if city officials had cut their total tax levy in the 2012 budget, city property owners still would have faced an increase in their municipal tax rate and payments. That type of information is important to include in news coverage about local property taxes so readers understand the degree of accountability for their tax increase. (Of course, local officials are also responsible for generating economic development to ensure their towns' ratable base remains stable. That's an issue we'll address in another section of this guide.)

A third way some municipal finance officials present the annual change in property tax rates is to group all three components of the tax bill together – the portions funding municipal, school and county budgets. This is officials' favorite approach in instances when the town's share of the taxes is going up. By grouping the municipal rate with the others – especially if school and county taxes are relatively stable - they can mask the impact of the increase. That may allow them, for example, to say tax rates are rising by four percent, when in reality the municipal portion is going up by 13 percent. Therefore, when officials present tax rates, always make sure of what they are talking about. Ask if the rate is just for the municipal levy, or all three combined. If it's all three, ask for the breakdown on just the municipal portion. In writing about a municipal budget, that portion is really the most relevant. The city council should not take credit, or get the blame, for tax increases or decreases in the school and county budgets.

Capital budget:

These are the large expenditures on projects with long-term impact for which municipalities borrow money, such as building a new firehouse, acquiring land for a park, or repairing sewer systems.

Get a copy of the list of proposed projects and their costs. In the hyper-local world, each proposed project could be the topic of a separate news story. But be careful in getting the dollar figures. The capital budget should show not only the total cost of a project, but how much is being borrowed each year to cover that cost. Municipalities often spread the cost out over several years. For example, a town building a new public safety complex may borrow \$700,000 the first year for studies and design work, \$1.2 million the second year to buy the land and \$3 million in the third for the actual construction. To report in that first year that the town is borrowing \$700,000 to build the complex would be misleading. What you would want to write is, "The town is now spending \$700,000 for design work on a new public safety complex for which it will borrow a total of \$4.9 million over the next three years."

Notice, I didn't say the project will cost \$4.9 million. That's because it will actually cost more than that when the interest payments are factored in. When it comes time to actually borrow the money, your town's proposal to the New Jersey Local Finance Board should include the duration of the loan and the projected interest costs. (The Local Finance Board is an entity within the DCA that must approve all local government borrowing.)

Also, find out if the capital budget includes any refinancing – borrowing new money to pay off old loans. At times, when interest rates have gone down substantially, this is good economic policy. Under such circumstances, get the bond reports on the refinancing and do a little story about it, mentioning how much less in interest the municipality will have to pay as a result of the refinancing.

But refinancing also can be a sign of a municipality with fiscal troubles. For example, twice in recent years, Paterson was looking at debt payments that were larger than what its budget could handle. So the city refinanced bonds for which payments were due this year, spreading those payments out over five years. In essence, what the city did was akin to taking out a cash advance on one credit card to pay off another. The city added hundreds of thousands of dollars in

debt payments to its fiscal future. Such a move must be approved by the Local Finance Board, and that approval would only be granted if the municipality's finances are in dire shape. Anytime a municipality refinances its debt, it's worth examining and writing about.

Parsing the Budget

Many times municipal officials won't divulge some of the most newsworthy information in a budget, especially in towns where political power is in the hands of one party or one faction. In those instances, a hyperlocal reporter must be all the more vigilant. Lucky for us, the state requires all New Jersey municipalities to prepare and submit their budgets using the same basic format. Let's go over some places to look for stories:

Sheet 3b: Budget Message:

In some aspects, the content included in the budget message will vary from town to town. Take, for example, the first page of Paterson's 2012 budget message. It looks like a simple list of numbers under a heading called "Cap Calculation," which is basically the breakdown of some of the examples excluded from New Jersey's cap on budget increase. The Cap Calculation itself is not something most readers would be interested in, but take a microscope to the items listed in the cap calculation. Among them are Total Deferred Charges, Judgments and Cash Deficit of Preceding Year. Each of those line items could be a story in itself, but probably not a story your municipal officials want you to write. In all three cases, you would want to ask for details about these numbers. And you would probably need to do so relentlessly. Government officials confronted with questions about issues they don't want exposed become evasive and elusive. They will duck you, or offer vague responses. You owe it to your readers not to accept such nonsense.

- **Total Deferred Charges:** Ask for a breakdown of this line-item. What's being deferred, how much for each item and why? The "why" is particularly important because towns that defer charges probably are doing it because of fiscal problems. You could do a seven-paragraph story on this topic that would provide readers and voters with important insight if, for example, the current budget in an election year contains no tax increase. (Of course there's no tax increase if \$5 million in charges are being

postponed until next year's budget. What about next year?)

- Judgments: Again, ask for a case by case breakdown on this line item. You may learn about a lawsuit settlement under which the municipality has to make a payment. Bingo, that's a story.

Also, they may tell you they can't provide a breakdown on the line item because it's supposed to cover cases that will be resolved in the coming year. That's fine. Then ask for a list of pending cases. Once you have that list, you can go to the county courthouse and look up the cases files and find out about the various lawsuits pending against the municipality. That's also a story, which could be tied to the budget: "The town of Mayberry has set aside \$7 million in its cover to cover potential losses from lawsuits filed against the municipality. The litigation ranged from a complaint by a police department secretary who says she was sexually harassed to a motorist who's blaming the city for an accident that totaled his car because a traffic light was not working.

Finally, you ought to go back to the previous two or three years' budgets and see if there's been an increase in the amount of money allocated for judgments.

- Cash Deficit for the Preceding Year: Municipal budgets aren't supposed to end the year with deficits and most of your towns won't have one. But if yours does, that's news, and it's certainly not the kind of news the mayor is going to issue a press release about. Moreover, officials aren't going to want to discuss it in great detail. Be persistent. Ask them how the deficit came about. In truth, either something unexpected happened or the city crafted a budget that wasn't realistic (Perhaps officials were too optimistic on revenue projections or about costs savings.).

In any case, you should ask for a breakdown of that deficit. In other words, which revenue line items came in lower than budgeted, and by how much, and which expenditures exceeded the budget and by how much. This information should be readily available as part of the ongoing tracking of the budget that municipal officials are supposed to do during the course of the fiscal year. So don't let them tell you your request will take

too much work to fulfill. Or, if they do say something like that, simply respond by telling them you'll have to ask the DCA about the ways towns are supposed to monitor their budgets.

One last point: All the items mentioned in the budget message are covered in more detail, with figures from the previous year, towards the end of the appropriations section. That sort of information provides context for your story. Sometimes, it even becomes the story, such as if the town is expecting to pay out twice as much money for judgments than it did the previous year.

Sheet 3c: Analysis of Compensating Absence Liability:

This is one of the first sections of the state budget document. It contains information that every hyperlocal reporter should write a story about.

What is compensated absence liability? It's basically how much money the municipality would have to pay out to cover unused sick, vacation and other leave time if all its employees decided to quit their jobs on the first day of the budget year. The budget provides a department-by-department breakdown of how many unused days employees have accumulated and what is the dollar value of that time. These numbers by themselves make interesting reading.

For example, Paterson's 2012 budget shows the city's compensated absence liability is \$12 million and its employees have banked 53,815 unused leave days. The budget also shows that \$5.6 million of that liability is for public safety department employees who have accumulated 19,119 days. If all you do is report the overall leave time liability and provide the breakdown for each department, you're providing your readers with information about the use of their tax dollars that they wouldn't get anywhere else.

But there's more you can do. First, you can do some simple math. For each department, you can divide the number of days accumulated into the value of the accumulated time and come up with a figure for the value of each day. That would provide your readers with insight into the different pay rates that employees in various municipal departments receive. This information wouldn't make a story by itself but would be good to include in a story about the overall absence liability.

Next, you can file an OPRA request asking for the breakdown of how the overall numbers were arrived at. Here's what you might submit: "Under New Jersey's Open Public Records Act, I am requesting a breakdown of the municipality's Compensated Absence Liability that lists each employee by name, job title and by department and includes both the number of days of accumulated absences and the value of accumulated absence for each employee. Please provide this data in an excel spreadsheet."

(If you don't know Excel, or aren't used to working in Excel, invest an hour using a guide you can get on the internet or at any bookstore. For these purposes, all you need is a rudimentary understanding.)

The information from this OPRA request will allow you to do two things. First, you can determine how many employees in each department are entitled to severance payouts. Simply use Excel to sort the data by department and then count up the numbers for each department. Once you have those employee numbers, you can now divide the total value of uncompensated leave time by the number of employees and find out how much the average payout would be per department. Those calculations would result in a story that may begin something like this: "Members of the city's police department stand to receive an average of \$95,000 for their unused vacation and sick time when they retire, or three times as much as the workers in any other municipal department." The rest of the story would include the averages for all the departments, the gross numbers of accumulated days and their value for each department as well as comments from the mayor and council members about these potential payouts.

Another story you might do using the data obtained through OPRA is a ranking of the payouts owed to individual employees. You would get this by sorting your Excel spreadsheet by the accumulated leave value column. That might give a story that says something like this: "The town's police chief has \$235,000 worth of unused sick and vacation time that he could cash in when he retires. That figure is higher than the potential payment for anyone else on the town's payroll and is more than \$100,000 larger than the municipal employee with the second highest amount."

Often, police chiefs, town managers and school superintendents

make headlines when they retire because of the size of their severance payments. By using the budget and OPRA, you can expose these potential payments years before officials actually retire.

If you want to do in-depth reporting on this issue, you should file an OPRA request for several other things that would also prove useful in your ongoing coverage of the municipality:

- First, file a request for the current labor contract for all municipal labor unions. These contracts will tell you how many leave days employees in various municipal jobs get. They also may describe the limits the municipality has placed on how much time, in terms of number of days or value, employees are allowed to accumulate. This information could provide the basis for another story if there are imbalances among the benefits given to various groups of municipal workers.
- Second, file a request for the policy or guidelines the municipality uses to set the terms of employment for non-union workers. Stipulate that you want included in that response any documents that show how many sick and vacation days non-union workers get, any regulations on how many days they can carry from year to years and any regulations setting the number or dollar value of the days they can cash out at the time of their retirement. Also, ask for any regulations governing nonunion workers' ability to cash out leave time while still employed by the municipality.
- Once you get this information, compare it to what the union contracts provide. Again, if there are discrepancies. That would be a story: "The borough's nonunion employees – many of them high-ranking administrators – are allowed to accumulate \$40,000 of unused sick time, compared to the \$15,000 limit placed on municipal union workers."
- Thirdly, request all personal employment contracts that the municipality has in place that apply to any individual municipal employees. Top-tier administrators, like police chiefs or city managers, may have their own deals in place. Once again, examine the details of these individual employees' contracts and compare them to what other nonunion workers get as well

as to what union workers get.

- **Wrapping up Compensated Leave:** If you have the time and inclination, you can do all this research on accumulated leave time and wrap it up into one massive story. That's the way most newspapers would handle it a decade or so ago. But the demands of the hyperlocal news business usually don't work well with long-term projects. For most hyperlocal journalists, it's not practical to gather all this information gradually over time and to do one big project in 1,800 words. That is why I've outlined little pieces that can be broken down into a series of smaller incremental stories that can be covered in 500-word chunks.

Sheet 4: Revenues:

The first line item the state budget form requires municipalities to list here is the use of surplus money in the budget. A large increase in the amount of surplus being used as revenue in a budget is always a red flag indicating fiscal problems. Surplus is simply money the municipality has in the bank. People dip into their bank accounts because they want to spend money that's beyond their normal day-to-day budget, because they've lost some other significant source of income or because they are living beyond what their current income will support. It works pretty much the same way for local governments. In the old regional newspaper world of municipal coverage, a budget story might include one or two sentences about the use of surplus in a budget. In the hyperlocal world, you can do a whole story of seven or eight paragraphs about it. If the mayor and administration don't want to talk about it, contact the council members, the political opposition or the gadflies. One of them will weigh in and provide the critical context your story will need.

(Also, in the appendix to the budget statement, there's a breakdown showing how much surplus the town had at the end of the previous fiscal year, how much it plans to use in the budget, and how much would be left over. This is all useful information to include in your story.)

But don't just examine the surplus revenue line item. Go through the whole list. The budget may show the municipality is expecting an increase in fees from parking meters, from its towing contract, from

the health department or its ambulance service. In any instances in which the projected fee revenue is supposed to rise by more than 25 percent, find out why. Is the town planning to increase the rates of that particular fee (That's a story.) or is it expecting more use of the service for which the fee is being charged (Also, a story.).

Let's take a moment to mention an important feature of the state's format for municipal budgets. It applies to the revenue section as well as to the expenditure section. The format requires towns to list the dollar figure for the new budget, for the previous year's budget and for the actual amount that was raised (if revenue) or spent (if appropriation) in the previous budget year. The listing of the actual amount of money raised or spent provides important context that will tell you whether the increase or decrease in a particular line item is the result of something that happened in the city during the previous year or something that's expected to happen in the upcoming year.

The last page of the revenue section, or sheet 11a, will list the municipal tax levy and allow you to compare it with last year's figure. This is the number that's most important to many of your readers.

Section 8 of the budget format: Appropriations:

Browse through this section department-by-department. It will break down spending for salaries and operating expense. Circle any substantial changes and ask about them. Pay attention to all the columns of data in doing that. Don't just compare the current year's budgeted amount against last year's budgeted amount. Under NJ's budget format, the columns on the extreme right will tell you how much was expended in last year's budget. In theory, the dollar amount that was expended the previous year should be similar to what was budgeted that year and similar to what's being appropriated in the new budget. Ask plenty of questions about any increases or decreases of more than 20 percent from last year (budgeted or expended) to the new budget. That smells like news.

Here's one warning: If you find 12 line items with substantial changes in them, chances are there may be mundane explanations in 11 of those cases. For example, the sections that include money from state and federal grants often can be misleading. If the current year's version of the grant hasn't been signed off yet in Trenton or

Washington, a line item may look like it's going from a \$7 million appropriation to \$0. But the numbers in such a case would only represent an accounting time lag and not a real program cut. That may be the case for the first seven line items you ask about. But the eighth may be a real cut, such as the end of federal funding for the 25 new cops the city hired three years ago. And by asking about that line item, you may learn the city is considering laying off police officers because it can no longer afford them. Finding news in a budget – especially news that officials want to keep quiet – requires persistence.

Afterwards:

Once a budget gets adopted, many reporters forget about it. Don't. If your budget coverage included proposals to create new programs or to cut existing ones, make a note of that in your work calendar. Check back with officials in a few months, or whenever they originally said they expect to launch the changes, and ask about the status. This is a means of holding officials accountable. If you find out they are doing what they said they would be doing, that's a story worth noting: "New automated \$300,000 garbage truck to hit the streets next week." Or: "Library to scale back hours starting next month. Impact of budget cuts begins."

But you also may find out they are not doing what they said they would do: "Despite budget promise to launch new after school arts service for youths, the program remains on the drawing board."

Also, keep your eyes open for any budget transfers that the municipal council is asked to approve. Transfers are needed when a department exceeds its budget by a significant amount and needs to take money from somewhere else in the budget to cover that shortfall. State law allows localities to shift small amounts of money among various budget accounts. But larger amounts require formal action by the council. Always ask about every budget transfer. The news often transcends a simple accounting maneuver. What a transfer tells you is that the town had to spend more money on a service or program than expected. Find out why and tell your readers.

The School Budget

Many of the same reporting principles that you should use on the municipal budget should apply to your coverage of the school budget. Look for increases and decreases in individual line items. Keep an eye open for the use of any one-time revenue items. Check out the capital project for new projects.

Here are some other things to keep in mind:

The general school budget document – the one that's advertised in the local newspaper – provides general categories of funding in such a way that they almost become meaningless. In many ways it's far less transparent than the municipal budget. For example, money for the hiring of 10 new teachers to help students whose primary language is something other than English may be spread around in different accounts in a board of education budget. The state's requirements for the advertised school budget are more designed for accounting purposes and not that helpful for someone who wants to use the budget as a way of finding out what is going to happen at local schools.

Ask to see the backup budget material that breaks down spending for each school in the district. Some school finance officials may balk at that and erroneously tell you all they're obligated to give you is what's being advertised. They also may say they're not obligated to give you any of the information until the public hearing or until after the budget gets adopted. They may try to persuade you that the preliminary budget may change and you should wait for the final version. All nonsense. Complete nonsense.

As soon as the school district submits its preliminary budget to the county superintendent, you are entitled to the budget summary as well as all the backup documentation – including the school by school breakdown – that's used to compile the summary. If you run into any resistance, provide them with this citation from the state's school budget code:

6A:23A-8.2 Public notice and inspection

(a) Each district board of education, upon submission of its budget application to the Executive County Superintendent or by the

statutory submission date, whichever is earlier, shall make available upon request for public inspection all budget and supporting documentation contained in the budget application and all other documents listed in N.J.A.C. 6A:23A-8.1 once the budget application has been submitted to the Executive County Superintendent for approval. Nothing in this section shall restrict access by the citizens of this State to documents which otherwise qualify as public records pursuant to N.J.S.A. 47:1A-1 et seq., or under the common law.

They may then ask you to pay for copies of all that material. In Paterson, for example, that represented 700 pages for the 2012-13 budget and about \$35. No need to spend that money. Tell them you simply want to review the documents and are willing to come into the school district offices to do so. If you still run into any problems getting the material, call the Department of Education's press office at 609-292-1126 and ask for the email of the current communications officer. Send the DOE press officer a note about the situation and cc your local officials who are creating the interference. State officials tend to have a better appreciation for what's required. They also get copies of the budget material in question. In 2012, when the Paterson school district dragged its feet on providing the full budget package, an email to the DOE produced a change of heart at the local level within one day.

Once you have won the fight to get the information, what should you do? Examine the breakdown of the spending for individual schools in your district. This provides meaningful information for parents/readers. In a normal town, with five or six elementary schools, you should do a story comparing the spending in various schools.

First, go through the data to find things that seem interesting to you. Look for increases and decreases from the previous year. That might tell you they are starting a new program, or ending an existing one. In both cases, that's news.

Also, compare the spending among various schools in the district. Be careful, though. Make sure you are comparing apples to apples. One school may have a \$1.7 million budget and another just \$700,000. The discrepancy may be the result of various factors, the simplest being differences in the number of students who attend

the two schools. You'll also want to find out whether a school includes special education students or other programs that may be more costly than routine classes.

Don't try to write a story simply based on your own review of the budget. There are far too many blind-spots in the numbers. If someone within the school district's administrative finance team isn't willing to go over the spending with you, try members of the school board, especially the chairperson of the finance committee or the board president.

(If you are having trouble getting cooperation from the board leaders, ask the members who are running for re-election. In most NJ towns, the school budget coincides with the school board election season, Use that to your benefit. If current board members don't respond, try the challengers. All you need is one person to talk to you, and then you often can use that input to crowbar input from other officials. For example, if there are two people running for a school board seat and one returns your phone message and the other doesn't, leave a follow-up message: "Hey Mr. Jones, I'm getting ready to write about school spending. Mr. Smith had some interesting comments. I wanted to give you one last chance to weigh in.")

Talk to the teachers' union president and the heads of your town's parents groups about the budget. In some places, they serve as vigilant watchdogs and can tell you about some of the spending needs of the district. They will mention things like the leaky roof in an elementary school gymnasium, the outdated textbooks, the lack of afterschool activities, etc. Once you get the local education interest groups to identify the needs, go to the Board of Education officials and ask whether the budget contains funding to address these needs. Whichever answer you get is worthy of a story.

Public Safety Coverage

This is something you can go about in a variety ways:

First, there's the daily cop check. Find out which officer in your town is assigned to handle routine check-in calls or visits from the media. Arrange to stop by police headquarters and meet that officer just to introduce yourself. Ask the officer when's a good time to check in

each day to see if there's any police news. In some places, the police public information officer can be very cooperative. In others, they can be obstructionists. In either case, don't come on too strong, at least not right away.

Be diligent about checking in. More often than not, they'll tell you there's nothing to report. At first, take them at their word. But also do some homework in the meantime. Check the Uniform Crime Report (UCR) issued for your town the previous year. There's a section that will include lists of every town's crimes. This will give you an idea of how forthcoming your police Public Information Officer (PIO) is being with you. For example, if the UCR said there were only 13 aggravated assaults and eight robberies in your town the previous year, then it's not so odd that the PIO has had nothing to report for a month.

But if the town had 275 aggravated assaults and 123 robberies, you know the PIO is either lazy or covering things up. If that's the case, you need a different strategy to get cop news. Start by visiting the PIO and gently point out the disparity between last year's stats and the "all quiet" reports that he or she has been giving you. If you're still getting resistance, use the law against the law enforcement officer.

New Jersey Executive Order #69 requires that police departments disclose within 24 hours any crimes that were committed as well as any arrests made. Read through the directive to know what you're entitled to receive. Do that before you go visit the PIO to complain about the poor information flow. Maybe that will shake some news loose.

If you feel like you're still being stonewalled, wait until the first day of the following month and start filing a routine OPRA request (daily or weekly, whichever suits you, though weekly would probably be more manageable), citing the requirements of EO #69, and ask for whatever municipal documents show all arrests made by the municipal police for that day or week. Ask for the charges filed against each person and for the other details that EO 69 says you're entitled to.

File a separate request asking for whatever municipal document that shows a list of all crimes committed and the various details

that the executive order says you're entitled to. Be specific about the crimes. Specificity is the key to any good OPRA request. You'll have to figure out for yourself which crimes to ask for, depending on what you determine is news for your town. In some places, there's so little crime that a burglary might be considered news. So ask for all crimes covered in the UCR, starting with homicide and working your way down to burglaries. In other municipalities with more crime, each individual burglary will be insignificant in the context of news. In those cases, you may ask for all crimes including homicides, rapes, robberies, aggravated assaults. Tailor your request to the realities of your town.

Also, be sure to state in your OPRA requests that EO 69 entitles you to this information within 24 hours. Indeed, the task of covering crime news in a town where the police department is uncooperative will take effort and persistence, but it's worth it. People read crime news. Comprehensive coverage of it will bring readers to your site. Besides, crime coverage is part of our 1st amendment duty. Reporting on crime is a way to hold public officials and the police department accountable for protecting the public safety.

This tactic may start the flow of information. Or it may not. If it doesn't, and you're still not getting information on crimes and arrests, then forward copies of your OPRA requests to the county prosecutor's office and the Attorney General's press office. Let them know you are having trouble getting the local police department to comply with Executive Order 69.

Okay, besides the routine crime checks, another way to cover public safety is through the UCR reports. The State Police and FBI release these every year in a big comprehensive document that includes statewide information, but they usually don't do that until more than halfway into the following year. It's old news by then. Through the Open Public Records Act, you're entitled to the monthly UCR reports that municipal police departments are required to submit to the county and state. As for the annual report, you can get your municipal version in January.

Cops will tell you that crime stats go up and down all the time and there may not be a particular reason for the variations. They encourage media to look at big-picture trends, and to some degree

they are absolutely right. In writing about your town's annual stats, always review the numbers for several previous years, not just one. (State police website provides these reports going back more than a decade). In less than an hour, you can do an analysis of 10 years of reports that will provide context for the latest one-year change. For example, instead of saying robberies increased by 20 percent, the numbers might tell you they reached a level that's higher than they have been since the 1990s. That's a much stronger story than a one-year increase. Or, you may find that the 20-percent increase simply brought the number of robberies back to where it was three years ago and had been for most of the decade, ending a brief period in which robberies had been on the decline. That's a much fairer story than simply saying the number of robberies surged.

As stated previously, you can also get monthly UCR data for your town. If you choose to write about monthly fluctuations in crime, it's a good idea to request the monthly reports over several years. Use them to create a new entry in your reporting library. By having the monthly reports from the past years, you can provide readers with more context. In most places, crime rises in the warm weather and declines in the cold. So if you choose monthly reports, compare the numbers not only to the previous month, but also to the same month in previous years. For example, the May to June numbers might look like a spike, but then you might find that the numbers for the current June are lower than they had been in June in any time in the last three years.

It is also important to get other voices into your crime stories. Police officers aren't the only ones affected by or interested in crime.

If the individual crime is significant enough, you should go talk to neighbors. If you're uncomfortable knocking on strangers' doors find people walking on the street, moving their lawn, raking leaves or outside the closest convenience store.

Man-on-the-street interviews also can augment stories on crime stats. Tell residents about increases or decreases in the crime statistics. Ask them if the data matches their perception of their towns. Do they feel safe? Do they know anyone who's been victimized? Do they think the police are doing a good job? Why/why not? Do they think the municipal officials are providing the

police department with enough resources or officers? You can pose these same questions to election officials.

You can purchase “Breaking news pagers”. There are services you pay for that give you updates on “breaking news” involving public safety. In most cases, the reports come through people who listen to police scanners and send out alerts on what the desk sergeants or dispatchers are talking about over their police radios. Systems like this are how newspapers often first learn about fires, motor vehicle accidents and various crime investigations.

Some hyperlocal sites place more of a premium on up-to-the-minute crime news than do others. In the majority of New Jersey towns, there isn't a lot of high-profile crime, so it's probably not worth the investment. If you are covering a city with a high crime rate, it is probably worth exploring.

Annual Stories

General elections:

Depending on your town's form of government, you may have municipal government elections every year, or every other year. Either way your coverage of these races ought to be robust. Plan your coverage. Be proactive rather than reactive.

First of all, identify the top issues in the municipality and do a separate story on the candidates' positions on each issue. Demand specificity. Candidates try to wax poetic in general terms, often because they have not done their homework on the issue or because they know the pitfalls of the issues and don't want to box themselves into taking a position that might backfire. Prepare your questions in advance and craft your questions in such a way that they seek specific input from the candidates. If a candidate responds with sweeping generalizations, respectfully point out that you asked a very specific questions and that they failed to answer it. Remind them of the importance of the issue and tell them you would hate to have to include in your story that they did not have a specific answer to the question.

Some hyperlocal reporters have said they view municipal officials and candidates as “big shots” and feel somewhat intimidated by

them. Don't take that mindset. People running for office are vying for positions as public servants. They have a duty and responsibility to be accountable to the public. As reporters, we're supposed to hold them to that duty. The elections are an important vetting process that's supposed to provide the public the opportunity to pick the best qualified candidates. If candidates don't say what they mean, if they respond in generalities rather than specifics, they are preventing the public the opportunity to make the best choice. Don't allow them to get away with that.

In addition to your stories on issues, check the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission's (ELEC) website for the candidates' campaign finance reports. The list of campaign donations must be reported in two main installments – one filed with ELEC 29 days before the election and a second 11 days beforehand. Also, candidates must report any significant contributions that come in during the final 11 days of the campaign in a supplemental finance reports within 48 hours of when they are received. These reports tell you how much money the candidates have raised, who made the donation, how much they spent, and how they spent it.

You should do at least two stories on the fund-raising in your towns. One after the 29-day pre-election reports are filed and another after the 11-day reports are submitted. These stories should include the bottom line comparison of the candidates' campaign war chests. They also should identify some of the largest contributors. Pay particular attention to donations from consultants and vendors that you know do business with the city, from various labor unions and other interest groups, from other political individuals and groups. In some cases, the names of candidates' contributors tell more about their positions on certain issues than do their speeches.

For example, a candidate may say he's in favor of preserving the town's rural character, but if 30 percent of his campaign funds come from development companies, that may mean there is something else going on behind the scenes. You can't say that outright in your story but you could lay out the facts for your readers and let them connect the dots: "Five major New Jersey developers have contributed a total of \$30,000 to Mayor John Smith's re-election fund, making up almost a third of his total donations. None of the

companies currently owns land in the city and Smith has said he wants to preserve Mayberry's rural character.

In some places, the candidates themselves do little fundraising. That's handled by the political party committees or political action committees (PACs), which are often controlled by the parties. So the names of the contributors will not appear on the candidates' ELEC reports. In such cases, you then need to track down the donations to the political party committee or PAC. That information also is on the election commission's website. If you are having trouble finding it, call ELEC and ask for help.

Be sure to cover Primary elections. In many places, where one political party or the other dominates, the primary becomes the de facto general election. In those places, cover the primaries as aggressively as you would the general election.

Even in places where control of government swings back and forth between the two parties, the primary races ought to be covered with stories on the issues

Grassroots Party posts are also elected in the Primary Every June there are elections that no one covers. These are the elections for seats on the Democratic and Republican party county committees. Each county committee member is, by law, also a member of the municipal committee of the party. In each election district, voters registered as members of one of the two major parties are allowed to cast their ballots for two representatives (one male, one female). Often the candidates in these party contests run unopposed. But it's a good idea to check with the municipal clerk about a month before the primary to find out how many people are running for the various county committee seats. Each contested district is worth writing at least a brief story about. If there are numerous contested districts that's probably a sign of a power struggle within the local political party, and it becomes a bigger story.

Also, the people elected as the district county committee members subsequently pick their parties' municipal and county chairpersons after the primary. These are often behind-the-scenes local powerbrokers. In many places, the chairperson of the party has influence over more prominent officials who are

elected or appointed to positions in municipal government. If the chairmanship of either party is being contested in these elections, that's worth covering just as aggressively as you would cover a town council election. Interview all candidates and some supporters. Find out whether there are substantive issues at stake, or whether the contests are personality battles.

Abstract of Ratables

Every summer, the county tax boards in New Jersey approve something called the "abstract of ratables." Few reporters ever write about this, but it's an important action that provides information that will help your readers better understand what's happening in their town. The abstract will provide data on the total amount of taxable property in your town. Get the previous year's abstract and compare the numbers.

If the total has gone up, that's probably proof that there's been economic growth in your town either through new construction or through improvements to existing buildings.

You should then go to the municipal tax assessor and ask what developments were responsible to the surge in ratables. Warning: you may run into an uncooperative tax assessor. In that case, you will have to file an OPRA request. Ask for an electronic list in Excel format of all taxable property in the town, listed by block and lot numbers, with the values for the current year and the previous one. In a particularly uncooperative town, officials may respond to your OPRA request by saying they do not keep the information in that format and deny your request. In that case, you have to file two separate requests, one for each year, and then find someone with a little electronic expertise who can merge the two lists for you.

If the total taxable property goes down, that's a bad sign for the town's economic situation and for its taxpayers. That means there's a smaller base of property upon which the city will impose taxes to pay for local services. In short, that means homeowners probably will have to pay a greater share of the cost of local government.

A reduction of taxable property is probably a sign that many owners succeeded in winning tax appeals. The local tax assessor should be able to provide statistics on the numbers of successful

and unsuccessful property appeals and how much the total amount of taxable property declined as a result. Also, the municipality's finance officer should be able to tell you how much the lost ratables provided in tax revenue. For example, in 2012, Paterson's loss of \$260 million worth of taxable property through successful tax appeals amounted to \$6.6 million in lost tax revenue that had to be made up by the rest of the property owners in the city.

Environmental Coverage:

Once a year, contact the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and ask for two things: a) the most up-to-date report on your municipality's Green Acres funding; b) the most current list of contaminated sites that need remediation.

Green Acres: In this request, ask for the breakdown of specific projects that have been targeted for funding, the amount allocated, the year the funding was allocated and the amount spent so far. This report may alert you to a new Green Acres project that's been added to the town's inventory. This would be a straight-forward, "good news" story. Chances are you would have already been alerted to this because local officials are quick to publicize good news.

But getting the latest Green Acres report may show that the town has been slow to spend the money on its projects. Paterson, for example, has a backlog of \$7 million of unspent money, much of which has been allocated by the state more than seven years ago. In a case like this, local officials are unlikely to issue a press release announcing such a backlog. But by checking the state files, you can break news that the people in power want kept quiet.

Contaminated Sites: Contact the DEP press office once a year and ask for the most recent list of contaminated sites in your town. There may be none. But if your town does have contaminated sites, ask for copies of any state studies or reports on the sites.

One way to approach the story is from the financial perspective. Find out how much it will cost to clean-up the site, whether any money has been set aside for the cleanup, and how much? Is there a gap between the funding that's needed and what's available? What's been done to try to get the company responsible for the pollution to pay for it?

Another approach is to look at the environmental hazards. The studies should say whether the contamination only affects the soil at the site, or whether it also puts in jeopardy some waterway – a local stream, river or underground aquifer. What does the study say about the health and safety of people who live near the site? Are they at risk in any way? Find out the nature of the contamination. Exactly what toxins are involved? What are the dangers of the substances? This is information that should be in the study.

Also, take a ride and look over the site for yourself. Is it well secured, or do the local kids play pickup games of tackle football on top of chromium tainted soil? That's something the study probably won't say. But by taking a look at the site, you'll be able to assess the access issue.

School Testing: Academic Issues.

On an annual basis, students across New Jersey take two sets of standardized tests. There are the NJ ASK (Assessment of Skills and Knowledge) given to elementary school students in the spring and the High School Proficiency Assessment in the late winter. The state provides a school-by-school breakdown on the results of these tests. There is no set date on when these results will be issued. It's one of those things you have to check on every now and then with the State Department of Education.

The Spot Checks

- Applications to the Planning Board and Zoning Board: Check the monthly meeting agendas for these boards to see what applications are being reviewed. This will help you find major stories, such as a proposal to build 300 new townhouses or mid-level stores, an application for a new strip mall or minor stores, or a new business seeking a zoning change to open in a residential neighborhood.
- Lawsuits: Once a month, ask to review the law department's files on new litigation that's been filed against the municipality. Also ask to see the new notices of tort claim filed against the municipality. If you run into any resistance on this, file an OPRA request. Anytime a lawsuit has been filed against the municipality, that's worth writing about. Also, create your own little list of pending suits against the municipality. This way, you can keep track of whether there are any trends that might transcend the filing of one suit, such as five lawsuits involving sexual harassment by departments, or six suits involving allegations of unsafe parks equipment.
- Do the same thing for notices of tort claim. Under state law, anyone who wants to file a lawsuit against a public entity must file what's called a notice of claim (a warning of a potential lawsuit) within 90 days of the alleged incident. The courts have ruled that such notices are public records. Keep a list of these notices and see if there are any trends involving them.
- Other municipal boards, authorities and commissions. There are far too many of these in most towns for a hyperlocal reporter to cover them all first-hand. But check the meeting agendas that are supposed to be posted in town hall and every now and then ask for the minutes for the previous few meetings of the agency. The minutes allow you to keep track of their doings. If things seem interesting enough (either on the agenda or in the minutes) you may decide to cover a few meetings of one of the agencies.

Here are some examples of agencies you might want to track and what to look for:

- Housing Authority: Any new projects on the drawing board? How long is the waiting list to get public housing? Has the federal government filed any audits about the local housing authority?
- Parking Authority: Any impending rate increases? Is the parking authority involved in any development projects that include a parking component? If so, what's their status?
- Environmental Commission: This commission would be the place where certain proposals, like changes in the recycling program or a proposal for an ordinance regulating motor vehicle idling, would come up for discussion. Check their agenda for issues like these that would impact residents' lives.
- Historic Preservation Commission: this committee identified buildings that would be nominated for inclusion in local and state preservation programs. These make for nice community stories.

Also, for the housing and parking authorities, it would be a good idea once a year to file an OPRA seeking their lists of all employees and their salaries as well as their lists of payments to vendors. In some New Jersey municipalities, quasi-independent agencies like these have become patronage pits and found themselves engulfed in scandal. You might find, for example, that these agencies have a disproportionately high number of employees with six-figure salaries. Or that all the consultants gave generously to the mayor's re-election campaign. Rarely are these agencies examined closely by the public and the press. It's a good practice to keep tabs on them.

The Cast of Characters (i.e. people you should be talking to)

- a) Seek out your town's arts community. They may be organized as an Arts Commission, a group, or simply loosely connected. If your town has a local gallery, it's a good practice to profile any artists whose work is being exhibited there. Or perhaps your town has a community theater group. Prior to one of their performances, write a feature about the group.
- b) Local Taxpayers, Homeowners or Neighborhood Associations. These are groups of citizens who band together for various reasons. Some simply try to pressure municipal officials to keep the budget and taxes down. Others hold events like home garden contests or tree-planting campaigns. These are people who are active in the community on some level and their efforts deserve to be part of any hyperlocal's coverage.
- c) Religious and faith based groups. In many New Jersey towns, churches and other faith-based groups remain at the core of some folks social and civic lives. Certainly, you're not going to want to write a full story about every "Tricky Tray" fund-raising event, but you might want to post three sentences about them as a community announcement. Also, in some places, the key players in the religious community have a strong degree of influence on local political figures.
- d) The Chamber of Commerce/Local Businesses groups. Develop a pipeline with them. First of all, this will help you learn about certain events that interest people, such as downtown car shows, sidewalk sale days, or street art exhibits. Also, the business community may become involved in certain government issues, whether it's taxes, economic development, parking ordinances, etc. If there's a construction project that's clogging Main Street, the chamber of commerce will know about it.
- e) Local non-profits. Some non-profits are focused exclusively or almost exclusively on a particular town. Their programs may be of significance to the community and some coverage is both warranted and worthwhile.

APPENDIX

Open Public Records Act (N.J.S.A. 47:1A-1 et seq.)

New Jersey adopted the Open Public Records Act (OPRA) in 2002, guaranteeing the public's right to access government records in a timely and affordable manner. Specifically, the law allows the public to view or obtain copies of any government document, with a few exceptions; requires a response in 7 days; and provides for free mediation by the Government Records Council (GRC) if a government entity denies a request.

RULES FOR FILING A REQUEST FOR PUBLIC RECORDS:

- 1) Know the appropriate government entity which has the record you are looking for, i.e. the Police Department, Clerk's Office, or the School Board.
- 2) Identify how you want to receive the information – via email, mail, CD.
- 3) Know what document you need. Be as specific as possible. Some examples:
 - "Requesting a copy of the municipal budget for the 2012-2013 Calendar year in an electronic format"
 - "Requesting the audio tapes from the police dispatching on the evening of August 1, 2010."
 - "Copies of all Labor Agreements for Municipal Employees for 2010, 2011, 2012"
- 4) If it costs too much to duplicate, ask to see the records first. You can visit the clerk's office and review the documents, selecting which pages you need copied.

Visit this website for the entire text of the Open Public Records Act:
<http://www.nj.gov/grc/laws/act/>

ACLU-NJ Guide to the Open Public Records Act:
http://www.aclu-nj.org/files/1013/1793/0121/OPRA_Booklet.pdf

Government Records Council's "Citizen Guide to OPRA":
[http://www.nj.gov/grc/public/docs/Citizen's%20Guide%20to%20OPRA%20\(July%202011\).pdf](http://www.nj.gov/grc/public/docs/Citizen's%20Guide%20to%20OPRA%20(July%202011).pdf)

New Jersey Executive Order #69

Governor Christine Todd Whitman issued an Executive Order "EO" in 1997 directing state and local police departments to make certain public records immediately accessible. This order directed law personnel to make certain crime information public. This includes who committed the alleged crime, what was the crime, when, and what were the circumstance. Police photos and fingerprints are exempted from disclosure.

Executive orders remain the law and in effect until repealed by the acting Governor or superseded by legislation.

Visit this website for the entire text of EO 69: <http://www.nj.gov/infobank/circular/eow69.shtml>

Open Public Meetings Act (N.J.S.A. 10:4-6 et seq)

More often referred to as the Sunshine Law, this New Jersey state statute guarantees the right of the public to attend and observe government in action. The law requires any government body to give notice and conduct business in the open. This means any votes to adopt a law or pass a resolution to hire professionals must happen in public. This law also requires every meeting to set aside a portion of time for public comment. This law applies to not only municipal governing bodies, but also any boards, commissions, or authorities, that have a fiduciary or final authority on government matters.

Visit this link for the entire text of the Sunshine Law:
http://ldb.njstatelib.org/Library_Law/lwopnmtg.php

Society of Professional Journalists Guide:
<http://njspj.org/downloads/sunshinelaw.pdf>

ACLU Guide to the Open Public Meetings Act:
http://www.aclu-nj.org/files/7313/1793/0127/OPMA_Booklet.pdf

Freedom of Information Act (5 U.S.C. § 552)

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) is the federal equivalent of New Jersey's OPRA Law. Even though this is a federal law, it might prove useful for a local reporter. You might need to file a "FOIA

request” with a federal agency involved in a local project, like the Department for Housing and Urban Development (HUD) public housing development or an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) clean up of a local superfund site. To file a FOIA request you can email, fax, or mail in writing a detailed description of the information you want. Make sure to check the FOIA website; they have tons of reports, documents and data available on their website.

Visit this link for the Freedom of Information Act portal:

<http://www.foia.gov/>

National Freedom of Information Coalition:

<http://www.nfoic.org/federal-resources>

Forms of Municipal Government

There are 566 municipalities in New Jersey divided into 12 different forms of government. Is your town partisan or non-partisan? Is the mayor elected by the people or among the council members? Are council members running at-large or in wards? Are non-partisan elections being moved to November?

It’s important to know how your municipality operates, and who has the power to make decisions, and when key elections take place. If you ask these questions, and get the answers you’ll start to see where the power lies. Below is a list of the traditional and non-traditional forms of government enabled by various state laws. To find out which form of government your municipality uses, contact your municipal clerk, or request a copy of the municipal code or charter.

FAULKNER ACT (N.J.S.A. 40:69A-1, et seq)

Also known as the Optional Municipal Charter Act, the Faulkner Act is a state statute that provides for 4 different forms of government that municipalities may choose to organize and operate under, including the Mayor-Council, Council-Manager, Small Municipality and Mayor-Council-Administrator. These forms of government lean towards more executive control and professional management of government functions. In Faulkner Act (as well as Walsh Act and Municipal Manager Act), citizens are granted the power of initiative and referendum, that is the power of the people to bypass the municipal government and adopt laws with voter approval.

Mayor-Council Plan (N.J.S.A. 40:69A-31 et. seq.)

Also known as a “strong mayor” form of government. Mayor and council members are independently elected by the voters in 4 year terms. The Mayor has executive power (i.e. makes appointments, prepares the budget; vetoes bills; oversees the departments); the municipal council has legislative power (i.e. approves the mayoral appointments and budget, creates the laws and may override the veto.) There is also a business administrator to help prepare the budget and oversee purchasing.

Under this form, towns have the option of having 5,7, or 9 members of the council elected at-large or in wards, concurrent or staggered terms, and either non-partisan or partisan elections. There are approximately 68 towns using the strong mayor form of government, including some of New Jersey’s largest municipalities: Newark, Atlantic City, Brick, Cherry Hill, Edison, Elizabeth, Hoboken, New Brunswick, Trenton, Vineland, West Windsor, Woodbridge.

Council-Manager Plan (N.J.S.A. 40:69A-81 et. seq.)

The Municipal Council is elected by the people either at-large or in wards, the mayor may be elected among the council or directly by the people. The mayor has no special power over the council or manager, but serves as a figurehead. In this form of government, the municipal council holds most of the power, they adopt the laws and policies, and hire the Municipal Manager who is charged with crafting the budget, hiring department heads, and managing the day-to-day functions of municipal government.

Under this form, there is the option of 5, 7 or 9 Council members or Mayor and 4, 6 or 8 Council members, elected at-large or in wards, in partisan or non-partisan elections. There are approximately 40 municipalities using the “weak mayor” form of government including: Teaneck, Montclair, Sparta, Willingboro, Brigantine, Cape May, Lawrence, and Newton.

Small Municipality Plan (N.J.S.A. 40:69A-115 et. seq.)

Just as its name infers, this form of government is for municipalities with small populations (under 12,000 people). In New Jersey, there are only nine towns that have this form of government. The Mayor is elected by the people or among the council, presides over the meeting and has a vote. The Mayor makes appointments to key posts

which are then confirmed by the municipal council. The council functions as the legislative body, enacting laws and approving appointments. The council is elected at-large with 3 year terms, either staggered or concurrent in partisan or non-partisan elections. The council may have either 3, 5, or 7 Council members or Mayor and 2, 4, or 6 Council members. Some of the "Small Municipality" Plan towns: Belmar, Lambertville, and Clinton Township.

Mayor-Council-Administrator (N.J.S.A. 40:69A-149 et. seq.)

There are only three municipalities that have chosen this form of government -under the Optional Municipal Charter Law - Berkeley Heights, North Brunswick, and West Milford. Under this form, voters directly elect the mayor and six council members in at-large, staggered, partisan elections. This is often called a "weak mayor" form of government, since the mayor has no vote at council meetings, except in the case of a tie. The council may create, by ordinance, up to six departments.

COUNCIL-MANAGER ACT OF 1923 or 1923 MUNICIPAL MANAGER LAW (N.J.S.A. 40:79-1 et. seq.)

Just like the residents in Faulkner Act communities, citizens in municipalities organized under the Council-Manager Act of 1923 have the power of initiative and referendum. Under this form of government, all the elections are at-large and non-partisan, the mayor is elected among the 3,5,7, or 9 council members. The Council has legislative and policy-making power, and appoints the Municipal Manager, who oversees the budget and day to day operation of the city. The Municipal Manager may attend and speak at council meetings, but cannot vote. There are only 7 municipalities that have adopted this form, and they have the option of concurrent or staggered terms. In Asbury Park & Hackensack all 5 council members have concurrent 4 year terms and in Medford Lakes they stagger their terms, in which case the Mayor is selected every 2 years.

THE WALSH ACT (N.J.S.A. 40:70-1 et. seq.)

The Walsh Act was adopted in 1911 to provide a municipal form of government designed to eliminate corruption by giving each elected official a specific responsibility. This law also happened to be the first charter law to provide the people the power of initiative and

referendum and the power to recall elected officials. More than 100 years after it was enacted, today there are about 32 municipalities with a Walsh Act form of government.

Under the Walsh Act, all elections are non-partisan and every four years. The governing body is a "commission" of 3 or 5 members, with each member designated a department to oversee. In a 5 member commission the departments are: Public Affairs, Public Safety, Public Works, Parks and Public Property, and Revenue and Finance. In a 3 member commission: Public Affairs & Public Safety, Public Works & Parks & Property, and Revenue & Finance. The Board of Commissions selects among themselves a commissioner to preside over meetings as Mayor for their entire 4 year term.

TRADITIONAL FORMS OF GOVERNMENT

Under these 5 types of government citizens do not have the power of initiative & referendum. These forms date back to the founding of the State of New Jersey. As time went on, and new forms of government were enabled by state statute, such as the Faulkner Act, some towns made the switch, others have not.

TOWNSHIP FORM OF GOVERNMENT (N.J.S.A. 40A:63-1 et. seq.)

The "Township" form of government is New Jersey's oldest, dating back to the Township Act of 1798. Under this form, a municipality may have 3 to 5 members of a township committee, elected at-large in staggered partisan elections. The Township Committee elects one member to serve as mayor for a one-year term to preside over meetings. According to the New Jersey League of Municipalities, as of 2006 there were 144 municipalities with a Township Committee form of government.

BOROUGH FORM OF GOVERNMENT (N.J.S.A. 40A:60-1 et. seq.)

The "Borough" form of government is New Jersey's most popular, with approximately 218 towns falling under this category. In the Borough form, all elections are partisan and at-large. The Mayor is directly elected to a four year term, presides over meetings and can only vote in the case of a tie. The Mayor does have the power of veto and makes appointments subject to the council's approval. The Council is the legislative body, and assumes any executive functions not assigned to the mayor. The Council can override a mayor's veto with a vote of 2/3 of the council, confirms appointment, and makes

appointments if the mayor fails to do so after 30 days.

CITY FORM OF GOVERNMENT (N.J.S.A. 40A:61-1 et. Seq)

Most of the larger cities in New Jersey have opted for a Faulkner Act charter, but there are a few of the smaller cities that use the traditional “city” form like Plainfield and Linden. Under this partisan form of government the mayor is elected to a four year term and serves as the chief executive of the municipality and serves as the head of the police department. The Mayor may attend meetings, but only votes in the case of a tie. The council is the legislative body and holds the power to make most of the appointments. The council may delegate some of their power to an administrator.

TOWN FORM OF GOVERNMENT (N.J.S.A. 40A:62-1 et. seq.)

This is a form of government that was popular in the 1890s, and since then, many municipalities have opted for a new form, leaving only nine municipalities left that use the traditional “town” form of government. Under this form, the mayor is elected at-large and has the title “councilman at-large.” The municipal council consists of 8 members, two members from four wards. The Mayor chairs over the council meetings, has all the executive authority, may vote as a councilperson, and veto ordinances. And the council makes appointments to boards and commissions. Some of the last remaining “towns” are Kearney, Harrison, Secaucus, and the Town of Clinton.

VILLAGE FORM OF GOVERNMENT (N.J.S.A. 40A:63-8)

The village form is no longer used in the traditional sense. The municipalities that originally had this form, have transitioned into another form. In 2011, the Village of Loch Arbor was the last to change, opting to adopt a form proscribed under the Walsh Act.

SPECIAL CHARTER

Under the New Jersey State Constitution a municipality may adopt their own form of government with approval from the state legislature. There are about 17 municipalities that have a special charter, most adopting a form similar in part to a Faulkner Act community.

Download the Faulkner Act:

http://www.state.nj.us/dca/divisions/dlgs/resources/misc_docs/optional_muni_charter_law.pdf

New Jersey State League of Municipalities Guide to the different forms of government:

<http://www.njslom.org/types.html>

The Citizens Campaign's Guide to Initiative and Referendum:

<http://thecitizenscampaign.org/sites/default/files/Citizens%20Guide%20to%20Initiative%20%26%20Referendum%20-%20updated%202012.pdf>

IMPORTANT LINKS

New Jersey Governor

www.gov.state.nj.us

Connects you to all the state departments, press room, and state boards and commissions.

New Jersey State Legislature

www.njleg.state.nj.us

Access the New Jersey State Statutes, pending legislation, signed laws, and contact legislators.

Election Law Enforcement Commission (ELEC)

www.elec.state.nj.us

Regulates New Jersey's elections and campaign financing

New Jersey Division of Elections

www.njelections.org

Get election results, voter turnout, and information on voter registration.

New Jersey Department of Education (DOE)

www.doe.state.nj.us

Establishes school curriculum, distributes state aid to school districts, and publishes the school report card.

New Jersey Department of Community Affairs

Local Government Service (DCA-LGS)

<http://nj.gov/dca/divisions/dlgs/>

The Local Government Services division of DCA establishes guidelines for municipalities, distributes state aid to municipalities and awards transitional aid to distressed cities; regulates local ethics laws and financial disclosure forms.

Board of Public Utilities (BPU)

<http://www.nj.gov/bpu/>

The BPU oversees the regulated utilities such as natural gas, electricity, water, telecommunications and cable television. The BPU also regularly distributes local grants through its Clean Energy Program.

Government Records Council (GRC)

<http://www.state.nj.us/grc/>

Free mediation between the public and government entities when access is denied to a public record.

Federal Election Commission (FEC)

www.fec.gov

Regulates National elections and campaign financing including US Senate and Congressional Races

Internal Revenue Service (IRS)

www.irs.gov

Regulates 501(c)4 and 527 organizations, i.e. "Super PACS"

Town Stats NJ

www.townstats.org

Provides budget information for NJ municipalities in a standard format which provides the ability to do comparisons.

About the Author



Joe Malinconico has been a professional journalist for more than 25 years, including almost 13 years as a reporter at New Jersey's biggest newspaper, The Star-Ledger. Malinconico covered Middlesex County government, state transportation issues and the seaport of New York and New Jersey at the Ledger. In 1999, The Ledger's editors named him recipient of the in-house Dee Murphy Award for reporting excellence. In 2007, the New Jersey Press Association gave him the Robert P. Kelly Award for public service reporting for a package of stories about families of deceased military personnel who had to file Freedom of Information Act requests to learn about their loved ones' deaths. Malinconico currently edits PatersonPress.com, a hyperlocal site created in 2010 that has been named New Jersey's best online news

operation by the Society of Professional Journalists for each of the past two years.

About The Citizens Campaign

The Citizens Campaign, founded in 1998, is a non partisan community of citizens who believe we can no longer depend on the political establishment to govern and that citizens need the power to take the initiative to build and implement pragmatic solutions that make government work better and cost less.

To accomplish this, The Citizens Campaign uses a No Blame, Solution Driven strategy and provides a toolkit of political and journalistic skills training and expert support that gives citizens the ability to get things done without having to be elected officials.

The Citizens Campaign recognizes that for citizens to be empowered they must first be informed. Towards that end, with the generous funding of the Rita Allen Foundation, The Citizens Campaign works to foster state-of-the-art local government reporting in the emerging industry of online local newspapers otherwise known as hyperlocal news and provides training for citizen journalists. This guide book is a component of this important initiative.

The record of accomplishments of people empowered by The Citizens Campaign demonstrates the value of its empowerment tools and its non-ideological, solutions focused strategy. For more information, visit www.thecitizenscampaign.org

SHINING LIGHT IN DARK SPACES:

A Hyperlocal Reporter's Guide to Covering
Municipal Government in New Jersey



"Every town in New Jersey needs to be covered by reporters. Here's a guide that empowers any citizen to be that reporter. Here is the future of local news: it's hyperlocal."

Jeff Jarvis, Director of The Tow-Knight Center for Entrepreneurial Journalism, The City University of New York's Graduate School of Journalism.

"An excellent primer for covering municipal government. Malinconico touches on all the basics and adds some tidbits of advice such as 'learn the lay of the land,' touring the town with various people from the community, as well as investigating the background of elected and appointed officials. He also reminded hyperlocal reporters and editors that a video does not equal reporting."

Jane Primerano, President, NJ Society of Professional Journalists

"A solid, practical compendium to help any reporter shine a light on their community, and keep it there."

Debbie Galant, Director NJ News Commons, Montclair State University