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## **Mayor Fried: If County Can Oppose Hospital Deal, Why Not Fight for Robbinsville?**

*Fried Calls out Hughes for 'Lack of Consistency' in Taking Stands for Taxpayers*

ROBBINSVILLE, N.J. – Mayor Dave Fried today called on Mercer County Executive Brian Hughes to explain the “lack of consistency” in his opposition to a tax settlement between Hopewell Township and Capital Health, given the County Executive’s public refusal to intervene on behalf of Robbinsville, which lost \$1.7 million in tax appeals due to a revaluation that took place just before the real estate downturn.

“There’s a complete lack of consistency,” Mayor Fried said. “I have called on the County Executive to join me in seeking relief for Robbinsville, so that all county taxpayers get equal treatment. Brian Hughes has refused, insisting that my problem is with the Mercer County Board of Taxation, a state entity.”

“Yet, over the weekend, I saw him quoted arm-in-arm with the County Tax Administrator opposing the Hopewell Township settlement. He’s promising to fight the settlement because it would lead to unequal treatment for the rest of the county’s taxpayers. That’s fine, but where was the County Executive when Robbinsville asked for his help?”

In Saturday’s edition of *The Times* of Trenton, both Hughes and County Tax Administrator Martin Guhl announced plans to block a settlement of a tax dispute between Hopewell Township and Capital Health Systems, which is building a new hospital and medical arts complex. Guhl pledged to refuse to sign off on Hopewell Township’s tax rolls if the deal did not treat the medical arts facility as taxable. Hospitals are tax-exempt.

Hughes weighed in, telling the newspaper, “This deal is not going to fly. ... We want to make it clear that we’re going to protect all the Mercer County taxpayers. When we see a taxable entity, we’re going to tax it.”

Mayor Fried has sued the Mercer County Board of Taxation and Mercer County over the 2006 revaluation in Robbinsville, which the Tax Board ordered at the height of the real estate boom. Mayor Fried predicted, with alarming accuracy, that real estate values would fall as the revaluation concluded, and that the Township would spend the succeeding years fighting tax appeals. In the second half of 2009, Robbinsville reduced its staff by the equivalent of nine positions and made additional budget cuts to deal with the loss of its entire budget surplus, in the wake of at least \$1.7 million in appeals.

Worse, the Township learned that after its revaluation began, the Tax Board canceled scheduled revaluations in larger municipalities in Mercer County. Mayor Fried has protested this lack of equity and called for three things:

- For state and county tax officials to let Robbinsville reassess as many properties as possible and reset the Township's tax rate. An agreement reached in late 2009 will achieve much of this goal by mid-2010.
- For the County Tax Board to order other Mercer communities to do revaluations on schedule, as Robbinsville was ordered to do, so that county-wide tax equity is achieved. This request has not been granted and is the subject of the lawsuit.
- For Robbinsville to be reimbursed the costs of the 2006 revaluation and court costs of the resulting tax appeals. This request also has not been granted.

Mayor Fried has called on County Executive Hughes to join him in seeking fairness for Robbinsville taxpayers, but said that his request has been denied. Instead, Fried said, he has been told the County has no place in a dispute between a municipality and the independent tax board. "Imagine, after hearing that for so many weeks, my reaction after seeing Brian Hughes' quotes in Saturday's paper," the mayor said.

"You can't have it both ways," Mayor Fried said, "My question is this: Is the Tax Board independent all the time, or just when it's convenient for Brian Hughes?"

"I have been told that I don't understand how government works," the mayor concluded. "Apparently, I understand exactly how *politics* works – let the urban areas off the hook on revaluation, but make sure the suburbs pay those taxes!"