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## County sparks debate about energy savings

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By Chris Bishop Staff Writer

**MOUNT HOLLY** — As Cinnaminson fire commissioner Richard Dietrich sees it, an energy proposal being pushed by the Burlington County freeholders can only be of benefit to towns.

"I think it's a great idea," said the Cinnaminson resident who attended a meeting at the F.W. Holbein Middle School on Tuesday night. "The economics issue is so very important."



Dietrich was one of about a dozen area residents who took part in the hearing to discuss a program to lower electric utility bills.

Led by Freeholder Director Bruce Garganio, the meeting focused on the county's effort to create a discount electricity supply program for the county's 40 towns.

"To me, it ends up being a home run for all of us," said Garganio, a Florence resident who took questions from the audience in the auditorium in the middle school.

The forum was designed to answer questions about how the program would work.

Nicholas Reynolds, chief operating officer for Commercial Utility Consultants, the Barrington-based consultant to the freeholders, said each municipality must pass an ordinance in order to take part in the energy program.

Once a town opts in, all residents are made customers but may opt out at anytime, Reynolds said.

Reynolds noted that this only would apply to electric rates and not gas.

Garganio said letters explaining the program will be coming out in a few weeks.

He estimated that customers who took part could see savings of 10 to 12 percent.

The freeholder, a Republican who is up for re-election this fall, said he held telephone town halls earlier this year that showed many residents were upset with their third-party suppliers of electricity.

Garganio said the towns must decide by year's end whether to opt in the program.

Once the county knows how many towns and business people are in the plan, the freeholder said it will seek bids from prospective suppliers.

In January 2013, rural Plumstead in Ocean County became the Garden State's first town to take advantage of aggregation, and offered residents a rate 14 percent below those of Jersey Central.

"As our residents know, we freeholders are committed to making Burlington County a more affordable place to live and work," Garganio said. "We have a long record of successfully cutting property taxes and fighting to lower utility costs. Our new energy aggregation program can continue this tradition by reducing monthly electric utility bills for

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county residents and businesses that choose to participate.”

“This energy aggregation program takes advantage of the economies of scale,” the freeholder said. “The county will take the lead by making a ‘bulk purchase’ of electric energy supply on behalf of its municipalities, residents, and businesses. This will result in consumers paying a lower price for electricity than they currently pay to their electric company. Unlike with many third-party providers, this program offers built-in protections for the consumer such as a guaranteed fixed rate and no termination or early cancellation fees.”

Garganio said he would continue to hold town-hall type meetings to explain the program to residents.

He said that if all went well, the county could seek bids from suppliers by January.

Garganio and Reynolds made clear that it was voluntary, and a resident in a town that took part was not committed to ending their relationship with PSE&G or other utilities.

The freeholder also said he felt the issue was not a partisan one, and he expected support from both sides of the political spectrum.

Mayor Rich DiFolco, of Mount Holly, said he supported the aggregation concept.

“We in Mount Holly were excited to host the first live town hall event on this important program that will make it easier for our residents to pay their utility bills.”

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