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PATERSON Lavish spending by city charged

Convention-goers ringing up big bills

By TOM MEAGHER
Herald News

When Mercer County Assemblyman Bill Baroni needed an example of wasteful spending and political profligacy, he found exactly what he needed in Paterson.

On the re-election campaign trail last spring, Baroni cited Paterson officials at the annual New Jersey State League of Municipalities convention in Atlantic City as the archetype of extravagance. He drew the best reaction from voters when he mentioned acting Community Development Director Gary Melchiano, who two years ago feasted on oysters Rockefeller and filet mignon on the city's dime.

"In times of fiscal difficulties, when we're asking the taxpayers to pay more and more, it's the politicians who need to spend less and less on these trips and junkets," Baroni said Monday.

Melchiano could not be reached for comment. A secretary in his office said he was out for the convention, which begins today.

Every November, the business of Paterson nearly grinds to a halt for a week as employees and officials travel to the conference.

And every year, Paterson spends tens of thousands of dollars for dozens of workers to attend. Over the last five years, the city has spent at least \$61,800 to send 81 individuals to the conference, according to city documents obtained under the state Open Public Records Act.

The examples of excessive spending begin at the top of the city's administration. Mayor Jose "Joey" Torres, who was out of the office Monday for the convention, last year spent \$1,185 on a suite at the Sheraton Atlantic City. He shared the suite with Business Administrator Eli Burgos.

Last year, the city paid at least \$18,860 for rooms, meals, transportation and other expenses for the 39 employees at the convention, many of whom were billeted at the Borgata Hotel Casino and Spa. A room there cost the city \$158 a night.

"When you start to see dozens of people from a municipality go to the league, it starts to raise questions in taxpayers' minds. It's taxpayers all over New Jersey who foot the bill," said Baroni, a Republican from Hamilton Township.

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Paterson: Trips, junkets questioned

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More than 70 percent of the city's contingent, Burgos said Monday, goes to Atlantic City to attend workshops that allow them to renew their certifications in specialized fields, such as purchasing agents. "That's probably the best thing the league did," he said.

Among the state's urban centers, Paterson is not unique. Elizabeth paid \$14,000 to send 46 people to the league conference in Atlantic City last year, according to city spokesman Bill Reyes. That city also sends its officials to the convention for certification classes and continuing education credits, he said.

But some cities are less forthcoming about how much they spend in Atlantic City. Newark officials would not say how many employees they send to the convention.

A formal request for receipts and bills from the conference, filed under the Open Public Records Act, went unanswered.

Burgos said that this week, as in years past, the city will host a booth to advertise what the administration has planned for Paterson's future.

He said that several professional associations and corporations sponsor dinners and food-laden hospitality rooms throughout the week, and that employees do not usually spend much money on meals in Atlantic City.

But last year, some employees spent freely on meals, according to city expense records. Department of Public Works Director Manuel Ojeda took two people out to lunch and spent \$98.85. More than half of the bill was made up of charges for alcohol. Burgos said that, according to policy, the city does not reimburse anyone who tries to claim alcohol as an expense, and any such case might be "an oversight."

"Certainly, everybody knows that that's something that comes out of your pocket, if you're going to do it," Burgos said.

City records show, however, that Ojeda was reimbursed for his entire expense request, including the 3 p.m. meal that featured eight beers, two vodkas and a cognac.

Ojeda did not return a call for comment on Monday.

"I guarantee you it will (be repaid)," Burgos said.

Staff writer Jaci Smith contributed to this report.

BOUNTIFUL TRIP

The City of Paterson has spent thousands sending its workers and elected officials to the annual League of Municipalities conference in Atlantic City.

Year	Number of employees sent	Total spent
2004	39	\$18,861
2003	31	\$13,883
2002	32	\$9,270
2001	29	\$9,750 *
2000	36	\$10,056 *
Total		\$61,820

* does not include expense reimbursements

Source: city records

WENDI SEBASTIAN/Herald News

OVER THE TOP

Among expenses run up by Paterson officials at the New Jersey State League of Municipalities annual convention in Atlantic City:

■ **Director of Public Works'** Manny Ojeda treated two people to a \$98.85 lunch last year.

■ **Joseph Mania**, a public works supervisor, was reimbursed for a \$92.84 dinner last year at the Hooters in the Tropicana Hotel and Casino.

■ **In 2003**, Joyce Gregory Hunt, human resources director for the Department of Community Development, spent \$150.84 on room service over three days. Her orders included lamb chops, sautéed shrimp and fudge cake.

Also in 2003, then-Director of Economic Development Gary Melchiano spent \$48.76 for a dinner of oysters Rockefeller and petit filet mignon. He also spent more than \$43 on phone calls.

■ **In 2002**, Parks Supervisor David Ison locked himself out of his car outside the Atlantic City convention center. He charged the \$35 tow service bill to the city.

■ **Last year**, Mayor Jose "Joey" Torres spent \$1,185 on a suite for three nights at the Sheraton Atlantic City.