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Lacey road a wasteful boondoggle

Austerity message hasn't reached township officials

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Across New Jersey, voters have welcomed Gov. Chris Christie's message that local spending is out of control and his pledge that entrenched politicians must be held accountable when it comes to their pet projects and friends-for-hire.

But the news seems not to have reached Lacey, where a multimillion dollar vanity project benefiting the township's mayor - and its lawyers and consultants - seems never to die.

The vanity project at issue is a proposed road in Lacey that would require the taking of a widow's cherished house and the property of other landowners. The project also would destroy irreplaceable open space used for local recreation along Ocean County's Barnegat Branch Trail, diminishing another asset paid for by property taxpayers.

In the township's two expensive and taxpayer-funded applications for project approvals to the state Department of Environmental Protection, the DEP twice concluded, under two different DEP commissioners, that the proposed road cannot meet the requirements of the law. In reviewing Lacey's most recent application, DEP found that the road failed more than a dozen statutory and regulatory requirements.

The DEP also found that the road clearly would not deliver the congestion-easing benefits for Route 9 claimed by the mayor and other road advocates. The township has gone so far as to oppose other congestion relief projects for Route 9 to avoid undermining their arguments for the road.

Frustrated motorists should blame township officials, not the DEP or the opponents of this road to nowhere, for continuing traffic jams on the highway.

In a world where taxpayers matter, Lacey's response to repeated permit denials would be to stop throwing good taxpayer money at this bad project and to look at cheaper and proven congestion-easing measures, such as enhanced signal timing and intersection improvements on Route 9. But in Lacey, political vanity trumps accountability.

The response of the township, whose committee members collectively have served for more than 60 years, is to continue spending other people's money on favored lawyers and consultants to pursue an appeal of the second DEP denial. At a recent public meeting, Committeeman John Parker estimated the township has spent "close to a million dollars" on legal fees alone for the project.

Lacey Township cannot accept "no permit" for an answer and so has continued to spend - a \$3 million bond to build the road and more than \$1 million already spent on plans, engineering, consultants and attorney fees. Still to come are actual construction costs and additional expenses that will burden taxpayers even further. Yet despite the hours already

billed by lawyers and engineers, Lacey could not narrow the flaws in the project to fewer than a dozen.

Worse yet, the township is incurring additional attorneys' fees to shut its own residents out of the appeal process. So there is no doubt that the lawyers and consultants billing the town will reach and exceed their million-dollar milestone. Christie is casting a much-needed spotlight on this type of governmental high-handedness. Let's hope the light reaches Lacey's governing body, or failing that its voters, before any more money is wasted.

Bradley Campbell was commissioner of the state Department of Environmental Protection from 2002 to 2006 and regional administrator of the federal Environmental Protection Agency from 1999 to 2001. He is the attorney for the Lacey Rail Trail Environmental Committee and 12 homeowners affected by the project.