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River Watch holds off on info

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KINGSTON - The Lower Esopus River Watch, a not-for-profit environmental and educational group that has served as a vendor for Ulster County's stormwater management program requirements, supplied IRS 990 forms and financial statements from the past five years on Friday before the Dec. 31 deadline.

The group will not provide additional information requested by County Auditor Lisa Cutten that includes an inventory of equipment, receipts and copies of checks for purchases over \$1,000, saying the demands are unfair and a form of political pressure.

Cutten requested the financial documents and other information via letter in August in an attempt to account for \$2.6 million worth of funds that flowed through the county's Environmental Management/Water Quality Management Agency to the not-for-profit group since 1997 for the Learn and Serve America outdoor educational program.

David Straus, director of the River Watch, said he has no idea where the \$2.6 million figure comes from, and that the not-for-profit does not receive grants directly. About half of the funding for the Learn and Serve America program comes from state and federal money through the Kingston school district as part of the Mid-Hudson Service Learning Institute. The River Watch has worked with Ulster County, Kingston and Rondout Valley school districts and Ulster County Community College and Ramapo College of New Jersey to provide the Learn and Serve America program. Under the arrangement, the county has matched each grant dollar, however Cutten stopped issuing reimbursements after questions over a \$50,000 reimbursement request were not answered.

The River Watch said the requested reimbursement was for services already rendered and accounted for.

Joel Schuman, founder of the River Watch, said via press release, "Ulster County has one of the few remaining independent and effective EMC's (environmental agencies) in the state, and this is a thinly veiled attempt by the new Democratic administration to destroy it."

Cutten rebutted Schuman's contention and said, "I don't go on people's rumors. I have to go on the facts in front of me, and my inquiry came with the \$50,000 request that came across my desk (in May)."

The River Watch has removed Ulster County's role in administrative services for Learn and Serve America, and said the county will no longer be a part of the Mid-

Hudson Service Learning Institute.

County Legislator Brian Shapiro, chairman of the Legislature's Environmental Committee, said he is not concerned over the future of the stormwater management program, despite the decrease in volunteer support and equipment from the River Watch.

Shapiro, D-Woodstock, said the River Watch's communications were a scare tactic meant to "obfuscate the real issues - that the county has an obligation to the taxpayers" to account for funds that have gone to the not-for-profit through the environmental agency.

Straus said the River Watch would provide more information if legislators requested it, stating that the Environmental Committee voted in mid-December to limit Cutten's requests to Internal Revenue Service-required documents.

Shapiro said the meeting minutes did not show such a vote and that the committee does not have the authority to limit the auditor's request.

But Legislator Richard Parete, a member of the Environmental Committee, supports Straus' recollections from the December meeting, and said it was the understanding that the committee only wanted the River Watch to supply legally necessary documents. Parete, D-Accord, said the River Watch should be held to the same standards as other county vendors.

Cutten plans to send another request for the information next week and said she will provide legislators with a full report on her communications with the River Watch on Jan. 10 - the same night legislators will hear from the county's outside forensic audit that has examined the environmental agency along with nine other county departments.