



United States Residents Born Between 1936
and 1966 Are In For a Big Surprise

EVERQUOTE

Orangetown Rejects CDBG Grants Due to New Regulation Tying Housing Projects to Federal Aid

By rctadmin on January 26, 2017 · 0 Comments



BY ROBERT KNIGHT

CITY EDITOR

ROCKLAND COUNTY TIMES

What if the federal government wanted to give away money, but no one wanted it?

For the first time in recent memory, the Orangetown Town Board has decided not to seek any federal funding under HUD's Community Development Block Grant Program. The town is apparently not officially withdrawing from the program, however, merely declining to seek any grants this year. The board unanimously voted Tuesday evening to refuse to participate in the program out of fear that acceptance of any grants might require the town to also provide multi-unit public housing for low income families from neighboring townships.

Town Board members, particularly Republicans Denis Troy and Thomas Diviny, have complained repeatedly this year that additional federal regulations might require Orangetown to provide unwanted public housing to accommodate residents of other municipalities this year, in return for getting some small CDBG awards.

Despite assurances from Rockland County Executive Ed Day, also a Republican, that this was not the case, Diviny and Troy refused to budge Tuesday, vowing to fight any effort to participate in this year's consortium, in a break from the town's longstanding tradition of participation.

Democratic Supervisor Andrew Stewart appeared surprised by the board's turnaround and, as the town's grant coordinator, agreed to seek more information clarifying the exact obligations of the town if it were to accept funding for a project, noting also that the grant process is very time consuming and in this case yields very little money. was the lone holdout for joining the consortium, but couldn't even get a second to his proposed motion to join the group. With only four members of the five-man council present (GOP Councilman Paul Valentine was absent), such a motion was domed to certain defeat.

The lack of participation is unusual for a municipality in Rockland County, all of which are constantly scrambling for money from any possible source as traditional financing of governmental organizations falls increasingly on local residents through their annual property tax bills, which must be paid every January.

Three decades ago the federal government decided to assist local communities and streamline their own grant-making procedures at the same time by creating community development block grants through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

Under that program, every village, town, city and county in America can apply annual for cash grants for infrastructure construction projects that assist youth, the elderly, handicapped, low income and other “special needs” populations.

Competition for the grants was fierce, especially as each local community tried to pitch its projects against those from thousands of other communities. To simplify the process, and hopefully to insure that Rockland got the maximum amount of money it was eligible for, the county and all of its political subdivisions decided to form a consortium.

Each village and town would submit its want list to a county coordinator selected by the county executive and the Legislature. The coordinator would hold a series of public hearings throughout the county, select the best presentations most likely to be accepted by HUD, and submit them as a single application to Washington. The consortium usually got all, or nearly all, of its request, and then doled the money out to those communities which had participated in the process.

Orangetown participated actively for all but a handful of those years, when the administration of then Supervisor Joseph Colello refused to join the consortium. Colello claimed at the time that the federal government imposed “strings” to the grants that would force Orangetown to accept minority populations from other communities to use town facilities if the town accepted federal funds to help create them.

Even when Orangetown did participate in the countywide consortium under other local administrations, the town received little or no funding each year.

The biggest problem, town and county leaders explained, is that the HUD CDBG grants are only available for projects in census tracts that evidence extremely low income averages. As a relatively wealthy community, by comparison to nearby Nyack, Spring Valley and Haverstraw, Orangetown has only one such eligible tract, a half-mile strip of Route 340 between Sparkill and Orangeburg, where the town itself has no parks, playgrounds or other facilities.

The tract includes a dozen modest homes but the majority of residents are students at St. Thomas Aquinas College and Long Island University, Camp Venture housing and program centers for handicapped residents, retired nuns at the former St. Agnes orphanage and low-income elderly in two large Catholic senior housing projects, Dowling Gardens and Thorpe Village.

Since nearly 90 percent of the residents are low income, the census tract ranks extremely high in HUD’s scoring procedure. With no town projects to fund there, however, the grants have always gone to the non-profit organizations that own and operate the schools, colleges and housing which make up the district.

Virtually guaranteeing that process over the years, the non-partisan committee in Orangetown selected by the Town Board to seek out, screen and recommend projects for funding gradually converted from all civilian membership to a committee of three Dominican sisters, who routinely submitted projects affiliated with the non-profit organizations.

One sister left a few years ago, while the remaining two continued until last year, when they too resigned.

That meant the Orangetown Town Board had to find three or more new members, appoint them as a screening committee, charge them with finding suitable projects, get that list approved by the council, present the list at a consortium public hearing scheduled for Jan. 24, and then advocate for those projects during county-wide deliberations.

All within the first three weeks of January.

Supervisor Andrew Stewart, who coordinates the town's grantwriting work, proposed two names to be appointed to a resurrected grant committee at the last Town Board meeting, but could not even get a second to his motion, let alone a majority vote of the council, who said they wanted to see the grant proposals before moving forward.

The names he proposed were Robert Tompkins and Stacey Kastens-Weiss. Audience member Heather Hurley of Pearl River, a regular attendee at Town Board meetings, insisted she too wanted to be named to the group. When reminded that public participation is not allowed at council workshop meetings, Hurley kept shouting that it was unfair of the council to exclude her and her knowledge and input, until she had to be threatened with ejection from the room.

It was also at this point that Councilman Thomas Diviny suggested that not only should Hurley be excluded but that Stewart's recommendations also be rejected and that the committee be scrapped instead of resurrected. By contrast, others argued for more research on grant criteria and obligations and further discussion at the next meeting.

Orangetown rarely got any money from the consortium, Diviny exclaimed, and on the few occasions when they did it all went to the non-profit agencies operating along Route 340, and not to the town itself.

The project was thus of no benefit whatsoever to Orangetown, Diviny insisted, and there was therefore no reason to spend time, money and effort in promoting something the town didn't want or need, and for which it isn't even eligible.

Diviny went on to say that during his investigation of the HUD funding, through the CDBG program or others the federal agency runs, Washington would impose negative "strings" to the grants, insisting Orangetown accept minority residents from nearby areas in return for approving the grants.

Orangetown is already battling to keep some of those minorities out, Diviny went on to explain, such as its adoption last year of Rockland County's first "No Knock" law which prohibits solicitors from going door-to-door trying to buy homes on behalf of Ramapo residents attempting to make an inroad into the Pearl River area. Stewart clarified that the "No Knock" law, which he wrote in

response to resident complaints about cable companies, is not designed to target any particular ethnic group, adding that over 2000 town residents were signed up already.

Accepting HUD block grants would just be another way for the federal government to intrude upon Orangetown and force the town to accept residents it doesn't want, the councilman asserted.

Councilman Denis Troy of Pearl River agreed with Diviny, saying he had never seen the town so under assault during his 15 years on the Town Board that it has been the past year.

Council member Paul Valentine made no public comments during the heated discussion, but like Troy and Diviny refused to support creation of the new CDBG committee in Orangetown, and deferred further discussion to the next meeting on January 24. The fourth councilman, Jerry Bottari, was absent.

Frustrated, Stewart finally said the grant work was very time consuming for himself and his staff, for very little money for local projects, and the board should just let him know whether they wanted to move the process forward or not because he has other important town work to do. Stewart announced several months ago that he would not seek re-election when his current two-year term as supervisor expires this December.

Not discussed at the meeting is whether the Jan. 24 block grant hearing will be held as scheduled or not, and what the impact of Orangetown's withdrawal from the consortium will have on the group's county-wide relationship with HUD.

Among the few items of business conducted at the workshop meeting, the council voted unanimously to:

- Create a new position in the building department of assistant building inspector, and appoint Michael Acheson to that position, at a salary of \$87,771, effective Jan. 9.

It was also announced that the council is seeking new members for almost all of its boards, agencies, committees and commissions, and hopes to start making those appointments at its Jan. 24 meeting.

Among the groups are the planning board, zoning board of appeals, architectural and community appearance board of review, historic areas board of review, Blue Hill Golf Course advisory committee, board of assessment review, board of ethics, bureau of fire prevention, environmental committee, housing authority, emergency management committee, parks development and advisory committee, project review committee, shade tree commission, senior citizen advisory committee, substance abuse committee, traffic advisory board, volunteer health advisory committee and youth recreation advisory committee.

Letters of interest with resumes may be submitted to Stewart's office at the town hall, 26 Orangeburg Road in Orangeburg.

In contrast to a town workshop meeting last week, when the town didn't even have a single project to submit to the consortium, and eventually to HUD, two applications emerged over the past few days: a request for \$25,000 for replacement flooring in the century-old Maggie Conway House in Orangeburg and an unspecified amount to provide scholarships for low income