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## Gloucester County Times

### Open steps for court site pick

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Why the cat-and-mouse games over where Gloucester County might relocate its court operations?

Whether you think the courts should remain in the Woodbury county seat, or find greener pastures with more expansion possibilities in a more wide-open town, the freeholder board's evaluation needs to be as open as possible as soon as possible.

As last week ended, Freeholder Director Stephen Sweeney disclosed that two of the four towns in the non-Woodbury sweepstakes had been dropped from consideration. He just wouldn't say which ones.

Officially, Logan, Washington and Monroe townships, and Glassboro are all still standing. It means residents two of those towns may be getting worked up needlessly in anticipation of improvement to their local economy or against potential traffic and infrastructure woes that a court relocation might bring.

It was dismaying to learn that Sweeney, alone among the freeholders, has been involved in a review of the potential sites. We thought that to keep the process above-board, an architect was supposed to make a recommendation and that the freeholders' involvement was to begin at that point.

And, Sweeney said, the freeholders "will have a closed session meeting" and then make a decision.

The freeholders ought to think long and hard about what they seek to hide behind closed doors. Certainly, discussions about the courthouse location need to be in public. The board is not yet negotiating prices of any privately owned land the county might need to buy. And, since mayors in the four towns have indicated the tracts they want the county to consider, those parcels have already been identified. Though the freeholders might be able to find a suitably broad Open Public Meeting Act exclusion, they should not look for excuses to shut out county citizens.

Sweeney, after putting artificial deadline pressure on Woodbury last fall to fully endorse court expansion plans there, now wisely says, "I'm not going to rush it and make a mistake."

Regardless of what the open meeting law says they can get away with, the biggest mistake now for the freeholders would be to create a perception that a courthouse locale will have been chosen in secret.

Everything benefits and drawbacks of staying in Woodbury; reasons for moving to the chosen alternate site; the wisdom (or lack thereof) of moving criminal courts miles away from Woodbury without relocating the jail; the cost differential between building new and expanding in the city should be on the table. For a potential \$80 million decision that could alter people's lives and their tax bills forever, everyone should know what's being served at that table before it gets cold.

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