

## Orange Reservoir remains mired in legal disputes over whether it is taxable

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By **Eunice Lee/The Star-Ledger**

**ESSEX COUNTY** — A dormant body of water for years, the Orange Reservoir is drawing a lot more looks lately. Many of those looks are coming from inside McLoone's Boathouse, a fancy restaurant in West Orange built by Essex County that recently opened on the edge of the reservoir.

Essex County Executive Joseph DiVincenzo, has grand plans to use the reservoir for water recreation activities, but the land is mired in legal disputes which came to the forefront last week before the Orange city council.

The council voted down a resolution for Orange to lease the reservoir to the county for 20 years, that would net the city \$1.6 million during the life of the contract. Several council members said they're not opposed to the arrangement but had concerns — including just recently learning that West Orange had placed a tax lien on the property.

West Orange filed suit against Orange, and according to Orange Mayor Eldridge Hawkins the main dispute is whether the reservoir is taxable at all and at what value. While owned by Orange, the reservoir is mainly located in West Orange and a small part falls in Maplewood. Councilman Rayfield Morton said he's heard figures floated from \$18,000 up to \$600,000 for the tax lien.

"If you're going to do a deal such as this, everything has to be on the table: the lien, who holds the lien, the whole nine yards," he said. An attorney for West Orange did not respond to requests for comment.

Other legal issues exist as well. Hawkins and DiVincenzo have not always seen eye to eye and in April, the city had



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**Robert Sciarrino/The Star-Ledger**

View of the dam and spillway of the Orange Reservoir located in the South Mountain Reservation in Essex County, near the Turtle Back Zoo. Orange owns it, and the county wants it. (Robert Sciarrino/The Star-Ledger)

[Orange won't sell reservoir to Essex County](#) gallery (5 photos)

sued DiVincenzo and the county. Orange claimed \$1 million in damaged property they say was caused by an amusement park train ride from the county's adjacent South Mountain Recreation Complex.

DiVincenzo wants to beef up activities there with boats and a foot path around the reservoir, adding to the ice rink, zoo, zip line and miniature golf course at the larger complex.

"The rest is great but what makes it valuable is the reservoir," DiVincenzo said at the council meeting. The council's vote, he said, "is just a road bump" and expects another vote on the lease in the future.

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