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Courtney steers clear of local politics after union event

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Journal Inquirer

Published: Saturday, June 5, 2010 2:10 AM EDT

ENFIELD — After spending a day “walking in the shoes” of public employees at a child-care center in town, U.S. Rep. Joseph D. Courtney distanced himself from the local municipal employees union’s take on the event.

“It was really not any kind of statement or intrusion in terms of what the folks at the local level are doing,” Courtney said Friday. Instead, he wanted to get out in the community and work with residents, he said.

Courtney’s position came after the union, the CSEA/SEIU local 2001, released a statement titled “Outsourcing Enfield’s public services threatens to degrade residents’ quality of life, diminish their property values.”

The union has strongly opposed the Town Council’s budget for the 2010-11 fiscal year. They’ve produced a list of cost-saving measures, lobbied residents about the effects of funding and staffing cuts, and have said it’s not too late to save jobs.

The budget decreases spending by 2.6 percent to \$113.1 million and keeps taxes level. It included 11 layoffs of full-time employees and cut a number of other positions through retirements and not filling vacancies.

On Thursday, the union organized the event for Courtney to work at the town’s Child Development Center. It’s primarily a preschool run by the town for children starting at eight weeks old. It has two locations, one on High Street and the other on South Road.

For the union, the event was a chance to highlight a town service few residents know about, and call attention to funding cuts there. For Courtney, it was an opportunity to meet constituents and learn about early education. He is up for re-election this year in the state’s second congressional district.

In a statement released after the event, the union quoted employees at the center talking about their jobs. Courtney was quoted thanking the union for bringing awareness to the effect on town services when funding is cut. “You’re helping to start a debate about the country’s future, and about our quality of life,” he said.

The center’s budget was cut by \$210,000, or 9.1 percent, to \$2.09 million for next year. That didn’t include a layoff, but would have if not for a retirement and the elimination of unfilled positions, said Matt O’Connor, a spokesman for the union.

But Courtney was there for his own reasons. He often does work alongside locals when he’s in state, he said. Recently, he worked with and observed school paraprofessionals in Willington. Courtney also serves on the House Committee on Education and Labor, and is interested in early childhood education, he said.

“It was a really impressive experience to talk to the staff and teachers there,” he said Friday. Even with the youngest of students, teachers had an educational strategy, he said.

On the town budget, Mayor Scott R. Kaupin stood by the spending plan he and other council

members voted to set for 2010-11. "It was the best plan that could be put forward at this point in time," he said.

The union had tried to schedule Courtney's appearance at the town's Adult Day Care program, in which there was a layoff, Kaupin said. Kaupin, a Republican, warned him that the funding cuts there were routine and received bipartisan support on the Town Council.

The Child Development Center was picked largely because it worked better with Courtney's schedule, the congressman said.

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