

IN OUR OPINION

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No issue is so big it can't be ignored

The Jersey City City Council's modus operandi is to procrastinate or ignore a problem and with luck, it will go away.

This must be the case with the council's alleged investigation of overtime abuses in the Jersey City Police and Fire departments in connection with the 9/11 aftermath?

Dating back to 2004, an Office of Inspector General audit of the \$6 million the Federal Emergency Management Agency paid to Jersey City shows city police officers and firefighters billed the government for hundreds of thousands of dollars in overtime without proper justification and with questionable links to the city's heightened emergency status after the 9/11 attacks.

Police officers billed FEMA to attend funerals, charity events and city parades, according to a FEMA memo and city officials. In addition, some of the overtime claims seemed unrealistic, with at least three officers claiming they worked consecutive 24-hour days without sleep.

FEMA is looking for a return of \$2.08 million from Jersey City, and the federal agency has already withheld \$1.5 million for other claims put in by the city.

Hudson County Prosecutor Edward DeFazio investigated the overtime allegations and suggested that there were some who "took advantage of the situation." DeFazio agreed with comments by Downtown Councilman Steve Fulop, who called for a City Council investigation. DeFazio said administrative charges could be appropriately made under the City Council's jurisdiction.

The last we heard of this was in June, when Council President Mariano Vega suggested appointing a three-member ad-hoc committee to look into the issue. This new committee had planned to talk to public safety officials in charge of an in-house investigation of the FEMA allegations that had already absolved everyone of any wrongdoing. It does not take a genius to figure out how the City Council will decide the matter.

Yet, no one knows if this ad hoc committee exists, or where the council stands with the inquiry.

This newspaper believes Vega and his council colleagues are at the same point as they are with their work on affordable housing, a shade tree commission, and pay-to-play. The FEMA probe is getting the same scrutiny as those tougher ethics guidelines that were voted down by the panel.

In other words, the do-nothing City Council will continue doing more of the same.