

## Legislators urged to end laureate post

Elie Wiesel and black ministers among those backing bill in wake of Baraka controversy

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**BY TOM HESTER**  
Star-Ledger Staff

Charging that Amiri Baraka has used his role as state poet laureate to divide New Jerseyans rather than unite them, a group of rabbis, Jewish community activists and other faith-based leaders implored the Assembly yesterday to act on legislation that would eliminate the position.

Baraka has come under fire since he read a poem about the 9/11 terrorist attack that critics claim is anti-Semitic -- a charge the poet denies.

(At the Statehouse yesterday, the measure was also supported by a representative of the Black Ministers Council of New Jersey and in a statement from Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel.)

"The power of language, the power of the word can uplift or it can hurt," said Rabbi Eliot Malomet of the Highland Park Conservative Temple. "Amiri Baraka used language as a tool for hatred. It is a sad moment for poetry and a sad moment for New Jersey."

Nearly four months after the Senate voted 21-0 in favor of legislation that would eliminate the poet laureate position, the proposal is stalled in the Assembly. Assemblyman Neil Cohen (D-Union) said yesterday there is little interest in moving the measure.

"There are profound questions concerning free speech and questions about how to determine making a judgment on every line in every poem a poet authors," Cohen said.

Baraka, who has declined to quit the post, could not be reached for comment yesterday.

Gov. James E. McGreevey cut off Baraka's \$10,000 annual stipend after the 68-year-old nationally known poet and playwright from Newark sparked controversy last summer by reading his poem "Somebody Blew Up America" at the Dodge Poetry Festival at Waterloo Village in Sussex County.