

Astorino: Westchester deficit falls, 'toughest' calls ahead

By Gerald McKinstry • gmckinst@lohud.com • August 20, 2010

WHITE PLAINS — Westchester leaders keep chipping away, but bridging the county's massive budget gap means the "toughest" decisions are coming, County Executive Rob Astorino said Thursday.

With 450 county workers leaving or retiring, the estimated **savings** is up by an additional \$7 million, meaning officials are more than halfway to closing a large deficit in 2011.

But even with a \$72 million figure — far less than the \$166 million that was first projected — 720 jobs remain in jeopardy, according to Astorino, and that has some union leaders asking questions like, "Who is going to do the work?"

"The toughest budget decisions are still in front of us, but taxpayers must get relief," said Astorino, who has long said the county is broke and no longer can function as it has. "I am committed to submitting a balanced budget for 2011 with no tax increase."

The numbers are part of revised figures released Thursday by the County Executive's Office.

The head of the county's largest union, Civil Service Employees Association Unit 9200, commended the Republican county executive for trying to keep **taxes** at bay, but said he needed to explain how mandated services would be delivered with far fewer workers.

The numbers simply don't add up, said Karen Pecora, president of CSEA Unit 9200, which represents about 3,700 workers. She said most members aren't making \$100,000, even when benefits are considered.

"The bottom line is that the employees are already stretched to the max; we are working on twice the caseload allowed," Pecora wrote in an e-mail. "The employees did not create the problem and we should not be asked to bear almost the entire burden of resolving it.

"How many emergency calls will not be answered because 20 percent of Emergency Services has to be cut?" she wrote. "How much sludge will leak into the (Long Island) Sound because 20 percent of Environmental Facilities has to be cut, on top of the 40 (people) that retired? How many restaurants will have substandard conditions, or **contractors** provide substandard work because there are fewer inspectors?"

Sending workers to the **unemployment** line would simply compound the county's problems, she said.

Astorino has called on unions to contribute to their health-care expenses and for CSEA members to forgo 4 percent raises in 2011 as part of a "jobs for savings" offer, though the union has said it would not give those up because they were negotiated.

In releasing the updated figures Thursday, Astorino announced the departure and replacement of two directors at the Youth Bureau and Office for Women:

- Mary Kate Cabaleiro, who has worked for the Youth Bureau since 1997, was named coordinator for the Youth Bureau. She replaces Marlene Furtick, who retired as executive **director**. Cabaleiro will keep her current salary of \$83,115. Furtick's position, at a salary of \$118,965, will not be filled.
- Diane Balistreri, who currently serves as Astorino's director of community services, will take on the added role as head of the Office for Women. She will be paid an additional \$6,440, bringing her salary to \$67,545. She replaces Camille Murphy, who retired last week and was paid \$118,965.

Furtick and Murphy were among workers who opted to leave or retire under the state or county **incentive**.

An additional 20 to 30 retirements are expected later this year under the state's incentive, the administration estimated. Total savings from departing workers is now estimated at \$21 million, though the county expects to replace 20 percent of those who left because of the **incentives**.

Budget talks are expected to heat up when Astorino announces his budget proposal in the fall, and it then goes to the Board of Legislators for approval. He has predicted more program cuts, pain and difficult decisions are coming.

The progress is proof that there is no need to scare employees and that savings can be achieved working cooperatively, said board Chairman Ken Jenkins, D-Yonkers, who has been at odds with the administration over the severity of its budget problems.

Jenkins said a good approach is to "do good **financial** policy and not to panic."

"We'll see what the numbers are — there's still a lot of other opportunities," he said.