

# Astorino plans buyouts, furloughs

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WHITE PLAINS — Westchester County faces more than \$400 million in buyouts, salary cuts, furloughs and pay freezes to keep it from "going broke," County Executive Rob Astorino said Thursday night.

In his first State of the County address, before hundreds of people, Astorino said Westchester had spent more money than it had during a "golden decade" and boom years because of a "just say yes" mentality that relied too heavily on Washington and Albany.

The cavalry, as he called them, wasn't coming to the rescue.

"When your income doesn't cover your bills, you know you've got trouble," he said, citing how next year's expected \$1.9 billion in expenses could be short by as much as \$166 million in revenue. "In the real world, that's called 'going broke.'"

To attack some of its sizable problems, the [Republican](#) county executive announced a buyout incentive proposal to give workers \$1,000 per year of service, capped at \$30,000 per employee.

During the 45-minute address, which included 19 breaks for applause and two standing ovations, he again warned that pay cuts, wage freezes and furloughs that could [save](#) as much as \$420 million were going to be on the table. Furloughs could save as much as \$1 million a day, he said.

Astorino also called on the county's largest union — the Civil Service Employees Association, which represents roughly 4,000 workers — to open up its contract before it expires in 2011.

For any of these alternatives to work, Astorino said, it would require support from the county's six unions, five of which are in the midst of negotiations.

"Jobs for savings: That's the offer," he said.

The Board of Legislators should reconsider a proposal to have employees pay 15 percent of their [health coverage](#), he said, even though they passed a tiered alternative — one that Astorino vetoed — that favored the county's longest-serving employees.

"It's time for employees to contribute," he said. "I strongly believe taxpayers should no longer shoulder the entire burden of paying for the [health](#) benefits of county employees."

Six Democratic legislators, responding in an eight-minute video , defended county programs, called for cooperation and spoke of how county government brings all levels of government together.

Chairman Ken Jenkins, D- Yonkers, called it a "sobering, yet uplifting message" and promised to work together.

Nonetheless, they challenged Astorino's cuts to day care and [bus](#) services.

"The county must protect investments in these programs for our children as they are [cost-effective](#) and produce good outcomes for children, youth and families," said Majority Whip Judy Myers, D-Mamaroneck. "The county executive shouldn't unilaterally remove funding that was approved by the legislature."

In addressing those cuts, Astorino said Westchester simply "can't provide service it can't pay for."

Astorino also unveiled a proposal he is working on with Metropolitan Transportation Authority Chairman and President Jay Walder to have [New York](#) City extend one of its Manhattan express routes to Yonkers.

"There are still a number of details to work out," Astorino said. "But the talks are very promising at this point, and they demonstrate the importance of collaboration when it comes to finding ways to do more with less."

Pensions, Medicaid and other mandates complicate the county's problem, he said.

Looming deficits, such as \$166 million in 2011, \$266 million in 2012 and \$355 million in 2013, remain the crux of the problem, Astorino said.

To address the more immediate shortfall would require a 30 percent tax increase. Anything more than zero is too much, he said.

"The time has come for Westchester County to face its finances the same way every family must face them: Buy what you can afford, and pay the bills when they come due," he said. "I was elected to stop spiraling taxes. I am committed to doing just that."

Astorino called out legislators — not by name — who have challenged his numbers and cuts, including elimination of bus routes, day care and other services, and "urged them to get on board" with a zero percent increase.

Republicans praised the address as a message of reality — "the new reality."

The message wasn't all gloom. The first quarter of his speech praised what he called the county's greatest assets: its people. He praised many by name and

said the "strength of the county comes from the extraordinary spirit and talents of our people."

Astorino also reiterated the county's mission to provide essential services, promote economic growth and provide relief for taxpayers.

His underlying message was "coming together for a common good." Competence, collaboration and cooperation were necessary to maintain services while [cutting costs](#), he said.

"Painful decisions lie ahead," Astorino said. "But as county executive, I will make them with the overall good of the county in mind."