

## **Astorino's veto kills lame health-care bill**

By Phil Reisman • Journal News columnist • March 21, 2010

If you were paying any attention to the March Madness of Westchester politics last week, you noticed that County Executive Rob Astorino used his veto power to euthanize the health-care contribution bill.

Vetoes are rare, this being the first one in 13 years.

Rumor had it that a search party ventured into the dank basement of the county office building where it found the veto stamp in a forgotten box filled with Andy Spano's moth-eaten cummerbunds.

Think of Astorino's veto (for the record he used a pen) as a mercy killing. By the time the Board of Legislators finished taking target practice on the modest money-saving proposal it was so weak from buckshot that it was barely recognizable — and it deserved to die.

So let's do an autopsy.

The idea was to require nonunion county employees to pay 15 percent of their otherwise free health premiums, a move that would save the county \$1.2 million. It was like a simple flat tax in that everybody, regardless of salary and seniority, was to pay at the same rate.

Once that legislation was passed, the next step was to ask the county's large unionized work force to reopen its contracts and make the same 15 percent contribution, a concession Astorino said would help close a \$166 million deficit projected for 2011.

The Democratic-controlled board loaded up their shotguns. After 75 days of dithering — they call it "due diligence" — the

legislators eliminated the straight 15 percent concept and returned with a convoluted, six-tiered plan filling an entire 11-inch by 17-inch piece of paper.

In the end, they slashed Astorino's proposed annual savings in half to \$598,148. Of the 416 nonunion employees, only 153 were to pay the full 15 percent. Others got away with paying less.

But the most bizarre feature was that 111 employees with 20 or more years of service got away with paying nothing.

In other words, the plan had an unfair, regressive smell to it.

More important, the legislators' watered-down version of the bill would have presented a weak starting point in any union talks.

Of the 5,702 county employees, 1,725 have 20 or more years of experience. Applying the board's model, the health care of nearly one-third of the work force would remain completely free.

Board Chairman Ken Jenkins defended the bill as a fair compromise. Requiring anybody in county government to kick in anything to the health plan, even a measly 5 percent, is "historic" in his view, especially in light of the fact that similar-sized counties like Nassau and Suffolk counties have free plans.

Evoking the drop-in-the-bucket defense, Jenkins said neither plan would save taxpayers all that much money. As if 600-grand is chump change.

Taxpayers might well be frustrated that "at the end of the day" — to borrow a favorite Jenkinsism — so little was produced out of so much political conflict. To Astorino's opponents, it's practically a win-win situation whether the board chooses to override his veto or not. But here's the real reason to be mad.

Touted by the new County Executive Astorino, as well as by Chairman Jenkins, is a plan to examine proposals for a much cheaper health-care plan. The estimated savings, they say, could be as much as \$20 million.

Great idea — except wait a second. Where was the board when Spano rammed through the contract for a two-year renewal on the current so-called "gold-plated" plan just before he left office? The only one who objected was George Oros.

No wonder cynicism reigns.