

# Westchester reaches health deal

By Gerald McKinstry • [gmckinst@lohud.com](mailto:gmckinst@lohud.com) • May 12, 2010

WHITE PLAINS — After four months and untold hours of deliberation, the Board of Legislators approved a plan requiring some county workers to pay for a portion of their health insurance.

The vote was among several reforms that affect the county work force and are intended to save Westchester taxpayers money.

The 16-member board late Monday unanimously approved having nonunion managers pay between 10 percent and 20 percent of their premiums as a way to tackle a looming budget deficit and control spiraling costs.

It was a compromise with County Executive Rob Astorino, who in January asked for 15 percent across-the-board contributions.

Since then, various incarnations were approved, tabled and even vetoed. Both branches said this compromise was fair and equitable to workers and taxpayers and will achieve millions in needed savings.

"It took some effort but we did come to a consensus," board Chairman Ken Jenkins, D-Yonkers, said Tuesday. "It took a little bit longer than we would have liked, but the end result is something we can all live with."

As part of the bill, nonunion managers and retirees making less than \$60,000 will pay 10 percent of their premiums; those making up to \$120,000 will pay 15 percent; and those exceeding \$120,000 will kick in 20 percent.

Workers with more than 30 years on the job are exempt, as are those working at Westchester Community College.

It's expected to be a framework for union negotiations. The union representing roughly 3,900 county workers, Civil Service Employees Association, which has a contract through 2011, would have preferred a "grandfathered" approach for senior workers.

"I know we need to save money, we all need to save money," said Karen Pecora, president of CSEA Unit 9200. "It's extreme for employees to have to pay when they have not been paying all these years."

Pecora said CSEA, however, would work with Astorino and the board to find savings, but would not reopen its contract. Though not ideal, the union supports the buyout incentive, she said.

Passage of the bill was part of a series of broader reforms — ones that Jenkins called "landmark" — that included:

- a cap on sick and vacation payments, saving an estimated \$2.4 million;
- a voluntary buyout incentive saving between an estimated \$790,000 and \$1.2 million this year depending on how many people participate and \$6.8 million and \$19 million longer term;
- a recommendation of a hiring freeze;
- an allocation of dollars to hire a consultant to study the county's health offerings with a goal of finding less-expensive plans. That could save \$15 million.

Astorino, who vetoed the board's previous tiered version, which he called convoluted, said he would sign this bill and two others he proposed (buyout [incentives](#) for workers and caps on sick pay) because every dollar saved can reduce a projected \$166 million deficit, minimize layoffs and provide relief to taxpayers.

He called those savings "down payments" on the deficit.

"The current practice of having employees receive free health insurance was just not sustainable," Astorino said. "This law means Westchester will no longer be one of four counties in [New York](#) where the burden of paying for employee health care falls exclusively on the shoulders of taxpayers. That's a giant step forward."

The sick pay proposal limits the amount of accumulated pay a worker can cash in to 10 weeks, down from 25 weeks.

The voluntary separation agreement, or buyout incentive, gives full-time workers \$1,000 for each year of service, capped at \$30,000.

"Tough decisions lay ahead," Astorino said, "so it's important to create a foundation for savings."

The board also recommended that Astorino impose a hiring freeze. Since some positions are essential and state or federally mandated, the administration can't follow an outright freeze, but will attempt to shrink the work force, said Ned McCormack, communications director and senior adviser.

Democrats and Republicans lauded the compromise and worked toward its passage — in public meetings and behind the scenes.

It was "historic" and a victory for government and taxpayers, said board Minority Leader James Maisano, R-New Rochelle.

"This plan will bring significant cost savings for Westchester taxpayers, and marks a first major step in bringing down the cost of government," Maisano said.

Legislator John Nonna, D- Pleasantville, was pleased an agreement was reached.

"It took some time, but to get to the right place it required a give-and-take," Nonna said. "At least it's done and we can move forward. This has been hanging over us for a while."