

Astorino: Budget forecast bleak, so unions should agree to give backs

By Gerald McKinstry • gmckinst@lohud.com • July 22, 2010

Westchester County's financial situation remains lousy despite millions in savings this year — so said County Executive Rob Astorino on Wednesday.

In delivering a mid-year update, the Republican predicted more pain was on the way for 2011 and again called on union leaders to agree to salary freezes and health-care contributions as part of his "jobs for savings" message to them.

Astorino also directed department heads to lower costs by 20 percent, or \$94 million, which will likely lead to more service and program cuts.

"These are painful decisions that have to be made, not only by us, but by the unions," Astorino said. "There are no sacred cows."

The only thing sacred in his message was taxes — he reaffirmed his commitment not to raise them.

"Taxes are off the table," he said. "I was elected to put a stop to tax growth, and that's what I plan to do."

Although the county has already saved \$36 million in 2010 by cutting things like day-care programs and bus routes, offering employee buyouts and requiring health-care contributions for nonunion managers, Astorino said the county "hit a wall." The county must still tackle what is now an estimated \$130 million deficit for 2011.

Filling such a hole would require a 23 percent tax increase, he said. Every \$5.6 million knocked off the deficit cuts a percentage point off any tax levy increase.

As a way of making up another \$26 million, Astorino wants some union workers to forgo 4 percent raises and all to contribute 10 to 20 percent of their health care costs.

Without these give-backs, massive layoffs will occur — anywhere from 500 to 1,300, Astorino said. Regardless, county government is "going to look far different in January than it does today," he said.

"This is a crisis," Astorino said. "There can be no more deniability."

His critics, including the chairman of the predominantly Democratic Board of Legislators and the heads of several unions, acknowledge there are challenges, but say Astorino's worst-case projections don't add up and are unnecessarily "making people panic."

"The doomsday scenario is premature," said Chairman Ken Jenkins, D-Yonkers, who called on the county executive to settle six expired union contracts before asking the county's largest union to reopen its existing one that expires next year. "In order to get

people to contribute, meaning the unions, you've got to have numbers that are real." Jenkins, who recently proposed a 3 percent tax cap, said the board will work to find savings.

Astorino's message isn't new, but it is shortsighted, said Karen Pecora, president of Civil Service Employees Association Unit 9200, the county's largest union representing 4,000 county workers.

"His mindset is that the unions have to resolve this whole deficit, this whole burden," she said. "There's no scenario that we're not going to be laid off. He's going to cut services tremendously. Who is going to benefit?"

Some of those services done by CSEA members include programs for seniors, children, the disabled and emergencies such as 911 dispatchers, among many others, she said. It's unfortunate that so many people, particularly political leaders, come after working people who provide services when times are tough, said Alonzo West, president of the Westchester County Correction Officers Benevolent Association, which recently settled its 2007 and 2008 contracts with 3.5 and 4 percent increases, but is now working without an agreement.

Public workers understand there are challenges and expect there will be a give-and-take during negotiations, but simply want to be treated fairly, he said.

"You need garbage men. You need police. You need nurses. You need people in public service," West said. "When times are bad, you want to make us the pariah. We're not pariahs. It's not fair to come after the working person that serves the public."