

Astorino: Merge police, emergency services

By Gerald McKinstry • gmckinst@lohud.com • July 29, 2010

In an effort to save more money and streamline [services](#), Westchester County Executive Rob Astorino on Wednesday announced a merger of public safety and emergency services.

The move, the first [concrete](#) consolidation pitch since he took office in January, would save \$692,000 in 2011 if approved by the county Board of Legislators, and \$3 million over three years, Astorino said.

"It is the right thing to do operationally and it is the right thing to do to [save money](#)," Astorino said. "You have two agencies doing similar things, but separately. There are a lot of efficiencies we see in this. The bottom line is there are real savings for the taxpayer."

According to the plan, no police officers would lose their jobs. The bulk of [savings](#) would come through attrition, eliminating redundant administrative jobs and consolidating capital projects.

In appearing before The Journal News/Lohud.com Editorial Board on Wednesday, Astorino said the consolidation is part of his push to "right size" government.

Others that are being considered include merging the departments of Transportation and [Public Works](#) as well as the health, community mental health and social services.

"At the end of the day, we're creating a better [service](#)," Astorino said of the merger.

Under his plan, the Department of Emergency Services would become part of the Department of Public Safety. Public Safety Commissioner George Longworth would oversee three new divisions, each headed by a deputy commissioner.

Some members of the county board, including Chairman Ken Jenkins, D-Yonkers, and other Democrats offered support for the concept and said they're looking forward to the details.

"I have consistently said that the county should be looking to consolidate some agencies that make sense," said Legislator Martin Rogowsky, D-Harrison, and chairman of the Public Safety Committee. "There could be a cost savings and a convenience for taxpayers, and I'm sure we could work out something that is in

the best interest for the county."

Calls to the Westchester County Police Benevolent Association were not returned.

Astorino's appearance before the Editorial Board came a week after he delivered a not-so-rosy update on county finances and again called on union workers for salary freezes and health-care contributions and for department heads to lower costs by 20 percent, or roughly \$94 million.

He reiterated his "jobs for savings" message and said managers are now assessing needs and compiling plans for a different-looking county government with far fewer workers — from 500 to 1,300 depending on what the county's six unions concede.

"It could be massive or far less depending on what kind of help we get from the unions," he said about potential layoffs.

"I think we all agree the path we're on is not sustainable with salaries and pensions," Astorino said. "The narrative is not changing. It's only getting worse. There's a lot of pain with this."

Although the county has already saved \$36 million this year by cutting things like day-care programs and bus routes, offering employee buyouts and requiring health-care contributions for nonunion managers, Astorino said much more needs to be done since the county has basically "hit a wall."

During the nearly one-hour session, Astorino also spoke about the federal housing settlement, Rye Playland and cuts to things like day care and bus routes.

"We're trying to balance the needs of some versus what taxpayers can [afford](#)," he said of making difficult choices.

Critics have said Astorino is unfairly demonizing workers and making people panic. Many say he is balancing the budget on their backs and not treating workers fairly.

"He's talking about jobs for savings. Show us where you're [saving](#) at the top," said Damon Jones, a correction officer who is president of the North East Region of the National Black Police Association. "If it's jobs for savings, fine, but start at the top."