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Groups assail Spano's \$1.8B budget plan

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Several groups are calling on Westchester County to cut a \$1.8 billion budget proposal, reject retroactive raises for commissioners and department heads and even eliminate certain departments.

The Westchester County Association and the League of Women Voters of Westchester, in separate announcements yesterday, called on the Board of Legislators to cut costs and lower County Executive Andrew Spano's proposed 2.97 percent tax-rate increase to zero.

County officials said they have tried to do that, but couldn't because of a "\$47 million hole" from rising costs and declining state aid.

The league said the proposal does not "include significant cuts" and challenged the county's assumption that it's operating efficiently.

"What are most organizations doing today?" asked Bill Mooney, county association president. "Most are talking about how deep the cuts are going to be. I think the reality of it all is even though they're not spending this year, the taxpayer is going to get an increase."

In addition to the county association and the league, the Town and Village Civic Club in Scarsdale also released its analysis. The civic group recommended 5 percent cuts for nonsalary expenses, and 10 percent cuts for the county executive's and Board of Legislature's budgets.

Members want a hiring freeze on nonemergency staff, consolidation of public relations functions and a one-year moratorium on new programs or initiatives that are not mandated, among many others.

The group specifically called for the elimination of the Office of Women, Seniors Services and the Youth Bureau while folding some of their programs into Social Services and Public Safety.

The recommendations came a few days before the county board's scheduled public hearing at 7 p.m. tomorrow. Legislators are considering changes and are expected to approve a budget by Monday.

Last month, Spano released his spending proposal - one he called the toughest of his tenure - because of a \$27 million loss in revenues and \$20 million more in rising energy costs and mandated services.

Despite those challenges, Spano's proposal cuts spending by \$101,426 from this year, said Deputy County Executive Larry Schwartz and Susan Tolchin, Spano's chief adviser.

Schwartz said the administration "slashed discretionary spending" and eliminated 52 vacant positions, among many other cost-saving measures.

"We all agree, we'd like to get to zero, we'd like our schools to get to zero, we'd like our municipalities to get to zero. No one disagrees with that, we tried to get it to zero," Schwartz said. "We eliminated jobs. We cut overtime, we cut everything. We have tightened our belt. We have taken out the knife and cut."

As for the latest recommendations, both Schwartz and Tolchin said the county executive's budget cuts everything possible - minus state and federal mandates they say make up to 75 percent of county government. The administration will work with the county board to get it as low as possible, they said.

They also said they could lower the tax rate increase by not sharing tax revenues with municipalities or by eliminating a \$13 million subsidy to Westchester Medical Center, but didn't view that as wise for taxpayers.

"This is a pretty low tax increase despite our revenue losses," Tolchin said.

Regarding the proposed 3.25 percent raises for commissioners and nonunion managers that will boost the pay of the county's top earners, the county association and the league agree that now is not the time for that.

"At a time when taxpayers are making sacrifices, and it is uncertain whether the county's revenue projections are realistic, the league believes that this proposal is highly inappropriate and inconsistent with the county executive's budget transmittal message," the league said in a statement.

Mooney agreed.

"It's not a question of doing a good job," he said of those who may receive a raise. "It's about the economic reality. ... The rationale for this raise is just not acceptable."

Tolchin said the money is in the 2008 budget. It's intended to keep pace with pay increases in the recently settled contract so that workers aren't making more than their managers. Because it's only a one-year raise, it's half of what was initially planned.

All of the groups criticized the amount of time provided to the public to review the budgets, and they want it released sooner.

"This would afford citizens a greater opportunity for reviewing and providing input," the league wrote in its statement. "This schedule allows little time for analysis and study of this very complex document, and it also limits the county government's ability to adjust the budget in response to citizen input and economic conditions. As we have said for more than 20 years, this timetable is a disservice to the public."

Additional Facts

If you go

What: public hearing to consider county budget

When: 7 p.m. Wednesday