



December 4, 2008

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If there is any consensus on the status of the Westchester County 2009 budget deliberations it is that they should slow down. Surely, the economy is dreadful enough, the input from local analysts clear enough and the public discontent loud enough. The county Board of Legislators should revamp its schedule from one that currently rams through and finalizes a budget in a little more than three weeks, from County Executive Andrew Spano's release of his budget plan Nov. 14 to a planned final vote Monday. The board can legitimately give the process more time, through Christmas, if necessary, since a budget doesn't have to be in place until Dec. 27, according to the County Charter.

The current timetable makes little sense: rushing to make deletions from the roughly \$1.77 billion proposal; holding a public hearing on controversial, retroactive pay raises for non-unionized county commissioners, managers and employees; and voting on a total budget - all on Monday. The Board of Legislators should take more time to revisit the voluminous advice it has received - from civic groups, in public forums and other venues - before rushing to a final vote Monday.

This past Monday, three entities - one business group and two good-government ones - all called on Westchester County to reduce the 2009 budget proposal to reflect the times' bitter economic realities. The federal government confirmed Monday what most families and individuals have known for some time: The nation is in a deep recession and has been "officially" since late 2007. Not a day goes by without gloomy data about the economy and jobs, and dire predictions that government revenue will fall off precipitously in 2009, while demands for services will rise.

The retroactive raises

Meanwhile, public opposition to a Spano proposal to give commissioners and non-represented staff a 3.25 percent raise retroactive to Jan. 1, 2008 (upon which 2009 salaries, and related "step" increases are based) has been steady, even vitriolic (see the LoHud.com forums). Two influential groups, the Westchester County Association and the League of Women Voters of Westchester, in separate statements called the proposed raises inappropriate. "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.

The association and league each called on the Board of Legislators to cut costs and lower Spano's proposed 2.97 percent tax-rate increase for 2009 to zero. In a studied analysis, the Town and Village Civic Club in Scarsdale recommended 5 percent cuts for nonsalary expenses, and 10 percent cuts for the county executive's and Board of Legislature's budgets. Members also called for, among other recommendations, consolidation of public-relations functions throughout county government.

Administration officials have defended the pay hikes for commissioners and non-represented staff, saying they are necessary to keep pace with union employees. Last month, the county's largest public-employees union, CSEA 9200, agreed to an accord that provides raises of 3 percent for 2006; 3 percent for 2007; 3 percent for 2008; 3.25 percent for 2009; 4 percent for 2010 and 4 percent for 2011.

The administration stands by the tax-levy increase as well. The officials note that they have already pared millions of dollars in discretionary spending - necessary to address a \$47 million budget gap caused by a \$20.4 million rise in expenses "beyond our control," for items such as Medicaid, utilities, bus service and Para-transit, and a projected \$26.3 million decrease in revenue.

Time to consider

It's unlikely that any extra amount of time would woo the public on the pay raises; times are tough, and there is little sympathy for public employees, especially those at the top of the pay ladder. Nonetheless, the public-interest groups and others offer much food for thought, about current spending and future economic challenges. The concerns deserve not only a fair hearing but unrushed consideration. As the League of Women Voters noted, "As we have said for more than 20 years, this timetable is a disservice to the public."

The Board of Legislators should see to it that the budget receives all of the deliberation, and calendar, that it deserves.

A Journal News editorial