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## Westchester tax increase, raises assailed

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WHITE PLAINS - Raising Westchester County taxes and giving retroactive raises in these perilous times is a bad idea, some residents and business leaders said last night.

More than 75 people turned out - some opposing any plan that costs taxpayers more, others advocating their programs and asking for continued financial support - to a public hearing on County Executive Andrew Spano's \$1.8 billion budget proposal for 2009, which would raise taxes by 2.97 percent.

"Under the current economic conditions, which are expected to continue to decline, the proposed tax rate increase of 2.97 percent is too high and is more than the citizens should be required to absorb," said Barbara Strauss, a member of the League of Women Voters of Westchester. "The league believes that these conditions require the (county board) and the county administration to carry out their fiduciary duty to the taxpayers and exercise fiscal discipline by working to reduce the tax rate increase to zero percent."

County legislators did not address the speakers during last night's hearing - they are mulling the plan and are in the midst of making changes. The Board of Legislators is expected to approve a budget Monday.

The county board's budget committee this week made additions and changes to Spano's plan by adding \$5.3 million for programs and upping revenue expectations by \$5.75 million. Among the additions were restoring funds for community groups, some of which were at the meeting advocating the importance of funding arts, education, youth and women's programs, affordable housing and others.

"It's a small investment what you're doing now. The less we invest now, the more problems we're going to have in the future," said Frank Marte of Westchester Youth Council. "We're not even asking for more. We're asking that you sustain what you've given us."

Other speakers were particularly irked by Spano's plan to give his top commissioners and department heads 3.25 percent retroactive raises for 2008 despite saying there were no such increases in his 2009 budget.

The plan, which calls for \$780,000 in pay increases and \$110,000 in Social Security and retirement costs, also bumps longevity, compensation and other pay for supervisors, prosecutors and management-level staff at Westchester Community College.

"This is not a time to raise the salaries of commissioners - most of them make over \$100,000 a year," said Dorothy Fiorillo of Mount Vernon. "Why must they be increased at this time? People

are losing their jobs. They're having their homes foreclosed on. This is not the time to give out increases."

Several legislators have spoken out against any raises, while administration officials have said the monies are budgeted this year and are intended to ensure that managers' raises keep pace with union workers who recently settled a contract with the county that guarantees raises of 3.25 percent to 4 percent for union workers through 2011.

Earlier this week, several business and civic groups assailed the spending proposal, saying it didn't slash enough spending.

Members of the Westchester County Association business group and the League of Women Voters of Westchester reiterated their points last night. Members also said more transparency and public access to information were needed.

"While every business and household in Westchester County is seriously evaluating its essential needs and making critical decisions where necessary, we are seriously having a discussion about why we should raise the property tax even higher," said Dick French, a member of the Westchester County Association and president of the Regional News Network. "Just as the country reacted to the three auto executives flying their private jets from Detroit to Washington as they pled for a bailout, so too [is] the county executive awarding retroactive pay increases to his commissioners while at the same time many of our fellow Westchester residents had to join for the first time in their lives the food pantry lines. This only goes to document that our leaders are tone deaf."

Deputy County Executive Larry Schwartz has defended the budget proposal by saying they will spend \$101,426 less than this year despite a \$47 million hole that includes a \$27 million loss in revenue and \$20 million more in rising costs. After the meeting, Schwartz criticized the county association for its comments, calling it "inconsistent and hypocritical" for supporting a 4 percent tax cap on school taxes while blasting the county for its 2.97 percent proposed increase.

"We're 18 percent of the bill, and schools are over 60 percent," he said of the respective tax bills. "They say that's not good enough - quite frankly, that's hypocritical."

John McCarthy of White Plains said legislators have some tough choices and implored them to put taxpayers first.

"All of these causes we're talking about tonight, they're all good causes," he said. "It's tough times. ... You've got to do it. You have a fiduciary responsibility to taxpayers, and that's zero (percent increase). You guys have to get your act together."