



December 5, 2008

Spano scraps raises for county chiefs

*Jorge Fitz-Gibbon and Gerald McKinstry
The Journal News*

WHITE PLAINS - Westchester County's top commissioners won't get the retroactive raises they were promised by County Executive Andrew Spano - but there's no decision yet on lower-level supervisors.

The Spano administration is negotiating with the Westchester Board of Legislators on the proposed raises for midlevel managers, having already ruled out controversial pay increases for top-tier department heads and commissioners amid growing opposition, Deputy County Executive Larry Schwartz said yesterday.

"The county executive's decision is to eliminate any raises for senior managers," Schwartz said. "The county executive has heard loud and clear from the public. ... Everybody has the same goal: to be fully responsible to the taxpayer and fair to employees."

Among the raises off the table are pay increases for Schwartz, Susan Tolchin, Spano's chief adviser, and other top officials - who currently are paid \$155,000 or more. Each would have received about \$5,000 more this year under the proposed raises.

Spano sought the total \$890,000 pay-raise package as part of a two-year salary bump he promised his top officials and other nonunion managers - about 220 county employees in all. He backed off on giving them raises next year due to the faltering economy, but had moved forward on 3.25 percent increases for this year, retroactive to Jan. 1.

Opposition to the proposal emerged after a Nov. 23 article in The Journal News revealed the pending raises, which came after Spano repeatedly vowed to freeze commissioner salaries in 2009.

Last week, the Board of Legislators scheduled a public hearing to be held Monday, even as opposition from residents and watchdog groups continued to grow.

Legislator Jose Alvarado, who chairs the county board's Budget and Appropriations Committee, said yesterday that a majority of the 17-member board no longer supported approving the measure.

"I could give you this prediction: The proposal, as it is now, is not moving forward," said Alvarado, D-Yonkers. "It's not. That's the majority consensus."

"We caucused after the hearing (held Wednesday), and the different legislators have suggested different versions of what should move forward," he said. "But the good thing is the administration is willing to be flexible and move forward what would be palatable for the majority of the board."

Schwartz said negotiations were continuing with legislative leaders on proposed raises for midlevel managers.

He said those employees "are basically in the same boat" as civil service union workers, who recently settled on a new contract with the county that guarantees 3 percent to 4 percent raises through 2011 for the union's 3,800 members.

Schwartz said that as a result, county board employees also could lose out on salary increases.

"They have to decide about their employees," he said. "The same rule applies."

Legislator John Nonna, D-Pleasantville, said he opposed the raises from the outset. He said yesterday that he's not sure he can support even a revised version.

"Right now, I'm against any raises," he said. "If someone came out with a proposal" for those earning less, "I would look at it."

The board's Republican minority came out strong against the proposed raises last week, when lawmakers voted 14-3 to scheduled Monday's public hearing. Republican Minority Leader George Oros, R-Cortlandt, said yesterday that, with the country in a recession, a pay increase was ill-advised.

"This is totally the wrong time," Oros said. "It's a million-dollar expenditure, and it's really, to me, a slap in the face to the taxpayer."

Tolchin, Spano's chief adviser, said the proposed raises were already budgeted in the 2008 spending plan. She said they would have been approved earlier in the year, but county officials did not want to give management a raise before the county settled its contract with the Civil Service Employees Association. The county's contract with CSEA was approved last week.

Spano and some Democratic legislators had argued that the raises were warranted, in part because the contracted pay increases for rank-and-file union members could put supervisors in the awkward position of earning less than some of their subordinates.

Alvarado, the budget chairman, said he also supported the raises and thought they were "reasonable," reiterating that they had long been promised.

"But, you know, I listen to all of my colleagues," he said. "I think the majority of them are now uncomfortable with the plan as presented, and I am open for suggestions. The best thing to move forward would be with the majority support of the caucus at this point. We have listened - and the public is right."

Additional Facts

Budget critics live on LoHud TV

Live on LoHud.com at 1 p.m. today, reporter Gerald McKinstry talks with two people calling for cuts in Westchester County's proposed budget.

He'll interview Bill Mooney of the Westchester County Association and Mary Beth Gose of the League of Women Voters.

Watch on LoHud.com/LoHudLive1