



Bill Mooney, president of the Westchester County Association, speaks to the Westchester County Board of Legislators during a public hearing Wednesday at the county office building regarding his opinion on the \$1.77 billion budget proposal for next year. (Mike Roy/The Journal News)

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## Retroactive reasoning

It was the *way* it was done more than *what* was done that deep-sixed an effort by Westchester County Executive Andrew Spano to get 3.25 percent raises for his top aides and commissioners, department managers and those county employees not represented by a union. At the 11th hour, days before a public hearing on the matter was to be held, the Spano administration Thursday backed off its push for retroactive raises for 2008, which would carry over into 2009, in some cases enhancing worker pay due to built-in "step increases."

A compromise may be in the works to compensate lower-level county earners before a budget is finalized. A Board of Legislators vote could come Monday, though a spending plan doesn't have to be in place until Dec. 27.

Most important, though, should be a new recognition among elected officials that taxpayers simply won't stand for seemingly blithe efforts to give salary and other types of increases in benefits to public employees, unionized or not. Not in this economy, not with the job losses and cutbacks in the private sector. Granted, the administration made the county's largest union, CSEA 9200, wait years for a new contract, ultimately arriving at a six-year accord last month that raises wages 3 percent to 4 percent through 2011, and includes some hard-won "givebacks" on benefits.

Outside of that, though, it seems that both the Spano administration and leadership of the county Board of Legislators, all Democrats, have been terribly slow learners. A year ago, there was the uproar prompted by board Chairman William Ryan's ill-fated bid to boost his own stipend by nearly 40 percent, and extend 25 percent and 33 percent stipend raises to other legislators. The public's unease has continued into 2008, with questions about spending and compensation by the board and administration.

Against the backdrop of the economic maelstrom swamping Wall Street and the nation, property taxpayers in Westchester - the most overburdened in the nation due largely to their sky-high tab for schools - might reasonably have presumed that the Spano administration would take great care to avoid rubbing more salt into their wounds. One would presume.

## Full-speed ahead

Spano requested the retroactive raises in legislation he submitted to the Board of Legislators just days before he released his proposed 2009 county budget in mid-November. The legislation allowed Spano to trumpet in writing and words about the 2009 plan that there were "no new raises" for his commissioners and others. That didn't tell the full story - not in the candor taxpayers should be able to count on: He sought back-dated raises for the non-union staff for 2008, with benefit carrying over, of course, into the 2009 budget.

Once the public got wind of that - amid the steady stream of bad economic news, the wildly gyrating stock market and new jobless figures - public opposition reached a fever-pitch. By the end of a public hearing on the 2009 budget Wednesday night, taxpayers made it clear: Even Spano's proposed tax levy on a 2009 county budget of \$1.77 billion - 2.97 percent - was too much, notwithstanding the millions of dollars in discretionary spending already pared. And those retroactive raises? Forget it.

Thursday, the chairman of the board's Budget & Appropriations Committee, Legislator Jose Alvarado, D-Yonkers, conceded to The Journal News that getting the minimum nine votes from the 17-member Board of Legislators in support of the retroactive raises was a no-go.

## Now what?

It is unfortunate that the Spano administration tactic, and resulting fallout, obscured the real issue: Do the non-represented staffers, managers, department heads and high-end salaried commissioners deserve raises? And now, in this economic environment, how can government better assess worker performance, and tie increases to goals and objectives met, as is done in the private sector? Unfortunately for those who will do without, the administration certainly could have made a case for the raises, but that would have required a straightforwardness, candor and sensitivity to the taxpayer that was in short supply during this budget season.

After the board's stipend mess, an independent Compensation Advisory Panel studied the issue for elected officials. In May, it called for a more modest raise for the board chairman, but not until 2010. The committee also recommended an increase in part-time legislators' base pay to \$52,890 to take effect in 2010. The League of Women Voters of Westchester at the public hearing Wednesday night recommended to the county lawmakers that the panel's report, "which evaluated issues beyond compensation, warrants further review and consideration."

So does the overall issue of compensation for all county employees - a discussion that should be transparent, inclusive and certainly not a retroactive effort.

A Journal News editorial