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In Westchester, a hidden hand controls a lot of power

Phil Reisman
Journal News columnist

Everybody rants about the police bodyguards Andy Spano keeps at taxpayers' expense in order to satisfy his imperial fantasies, but the average citizen probably doesn't know that King Andy is served by a much more important protector - Larry Schwartz.

Schwartz's muscle is purely political.

As the \$157,370-a-year deputy county executive, Schwartz is the Cardinal Richelieu of Westchester. He is the brains of the outfit. When you think of Schwartz, you think of Oz and the line, "Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!"

Some say it's Schwartz who really runs things. I wouldn't be surprised if Schwartz says so, too ... in private moments.

It's intriguing to think that you could eliminate Spano's job, and it might not matter. Except for losing a few public service announcements about such things as flame-retardant Christmas trees, lead poisoning and the dangers of cholesterol, not to mention annoying robo-call reminders from the king to vote at election time, the basic business of the county could be accomplished with or without Andy.

That's because Larry is always on the job, behind the curtain, working the levers of government.

But Spano deserves some credit. He's a professional nice guy, as all politicians are. And because he's the front man for county government, he takes the heat. Nobody elected Schwartz, who is not a professional nice guy.

His important function is to play the bad cop. Schwartz loyally comes to his liege's defense whenever he is assailed by critics, a constituency that has grown during the recent debate over the county budget.

If you take on Spano, you are likely to receive what I call a "Larry-gram." Schwartz's correspondence are intense, angry, sarcastic, long-winded diatribes filled with countercharges and claims that frequently concentrate on the critic's presumed motives rather than the merits of the issues at hand. He specializes in the straw man technique of misrepresenting an opponent's arguments before pointing out how utterly stupid they are. His point is often completely beside the point.

For instance, he's frustrated over the fact that so many people were worked into a lather over Spano's sneaky attempt to get retroactive raises for dozens of county managers, including Schwartz, who stood to get a \$5,115 raise.

Schwartz complained to Journal News staff writer Jorge Fitz-Gibbon that "the whole focus is on the county government, which is 15 to 18 percent of the total tax bill."

"Why doesn't someone focus on 60 percent-plus of the tax bill, or on the local governments who are bigger than the county portion of the tax bill?" he said. "A raise is a raise. It's all relative. Do you ever look at the total dollar raises in local governments and school districts?"

It's a good idea, but beside the point.

Listening to Schwartz, you might get the false idea that he's running a small shop with cookie jar money and not a brigade-sized organization fully funded by a budget that's grown 60 percent over the past eight years.

Sometimes I think Schwartz is just a frustrated newspaper columnist, but he must know that he would have to suffer a considerable cut in pay and lose the free car the county gives him. He also would have to develop a tougher hide.

Larry-grams are throbbing works of resentment.

George Oros, the Republican minority leader of the Westchester County Board of Legislators, was a recent recipient of a Larry-gram after he had the unmitigated gall to ask his staff questions about the bloated county budget they've been trying to ram down the taxpayers' throats in near record time. He said it was "tiresome" to hear Oros' annual pronouncement to cut spending while "punting" to someone else the hard part of making those cuts possible.

Schwartz compared Oros to a child who tries to fudge his way through math class by stating the answer to a problem without showing how the answer was arrived at.

"I think it only fair that you be held to the same standard as a 5th-grade student," he wrote. In a conversation with a reporter, he called Oros a "fiscal phony."

One suggestion by Oros, incidentally, is to cut out the county's mounted police program, a total savings of \$500,000. In theory, mounted cops are used to control unruly crowds.

Unruly crowds are not a major public safety problem in Westchester, especially in Somers, where the county's three horses are boarded at Muscoot Farm. When there was actually was a potential need for the mounted squad during a near riot at New Roc City in New Rochelle, the horse trailer got to the scene after the mayhem was over.

Oros mentioned another time when the horses were summoned to stand guard at a protest at the veterans hospital at Montrose.

"It was mostly World War II vets," Oros said. "I can't imagine those guys creating a disturbance that would require horses to hold them back."

Oros and others have a lot ideas on how to cut the budget. But the one about the horses is so obvious that, well, a fifth-grader could have suggested it. So why didn't Schwartz?

Another Larry-gram was sent to Bill Mooney, the respected president of the Westchester County Association, who publicly called on Spano to hold the 2009 tax levy to no increase. Compared to most Larry-grams, this one was mild, but I sensed the sarcasm seeping through.

Schwartz urged Mooney to use his influence to get Entergy, the operators of the Indian Point nuclear power plant and a member of Mooney's business group, to extend its rate discount for the county.

Soaking Entergy for more cash certainly works for me. As Schwartz himself pointed out, the giant firm pulled in more than \$500 million in annual profit. If these guys are such good corporate neighbors, they can suck it up a little bit during a recession.

But Entergy already turned Schwartz down. So why would they accede to Mooney?

I think Schwartz was just sticking it to Mooney, which is the primary purpose of all Larry-grams.

Schwartz's love for King Andy is almost touching. But I fail to see what his Larry-grams really accomplish in the end. It's gotcha stuff that serves no one, especially the people who are paying Schwartz's salary - the taxpayers.

The other day, I heard from one of those taxpayers, a White Plains woman who said she was laid off a year ago. She wrote, "Right now, I still have no job, no health insurance and no prospects."

Spano's budget, she said, was "depressing."

I wonder what Schwartz would tell her in one of his Larry-grams?