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## Westchester county board OKs \$1.77B budget that would raise tax rate by 1.77%

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*The Journal News*

The Westchester County Board of Legislators approved a \$1.77 billion budget last night that raises the tax rate by 1.77 percent, despite cuts in spending.

It was \$1.5 million less than County Executive Andrew Spano's proposal, which would have raised the tax rate by 2.97 percent.

The budget passed by a 13-4 vote, with the four Republican board members opposing it. The county executive can now sign off or veto the budget. Legislators also approved Spano's \$93.2 million capital budget plan, which was 19 percent less than this year's.

"It was very important to make sure costs were controlled. We're early on in what will prove to be a tough period for the taxpayer," said Chairman William Ryan, D-White Plains. "The message is: It's a start, much more work needs to be done."

Spano released his budget Nov. 14, and legislators have since reviewed expenses and revenues with county commissioners and mulled changes. The most recent deletions included \$357,799 from the county board, \$559,081 from community mental health, \$393,793 from public works and \$900,000 in debt payments, among others.

Noticeably absent from the final plan were controversial raises for commissioners, directors and nonunion management - that proposal had been removed completely from consideration after a public hearing earlier in the day. Many legislators, including Ryan, said they were against pay increases for some of the county's highest earners, given the economy.

"I know there are many Westchester residents who are hurting in this economy. I fear that the economy will get worse before it gets better," Spano said in a statement. "I know that even the small tax increase is not what the public wants."

Particular challenges this budget season were a \$27 million loss in revenue and \$20 million more in rising costs, Spano administration officials have said.

To that end, Spano pitched no vehicle purchases, saving \$2.1 million; cuts of \$2.2 million in equipment purchases; and cuts in overtime that will save \$2.1 million. There are also cuts to Spano's security detail by 15 percent, travel and meals, and education and training.

The budget includes no layoffs among the county's work force and eliminates 52 unfilled positions.

Because taxes will go up under this budget, Republicans voted against it - they wanted no tax increase.

"I don't think they understand the plight of the taxpayers," said Gordon Burrows, a Yonkers Republican who was among three lawmakers who presented a budget with no increase.

All 17 legislators spoke about the budget. Much of the discussion on the floor centered on the need for county government, particularly since some people have called for its elimination and other civic groups have criticized the budget process.

Legislator Thomas Abinanti, D-Greenburgh, took issue with criticisms and defended the budget operations. He also said the economic crisis was not caused by county governments.

"We're trying to solve the problems that were created by the private sector," Abinanti said.

Leaders must better convey what the county does for the public, many legislators said, adding that county taxes made up 15 percent to 18 percent of an average resident's tax bill. Schools and municipalities make up the rest.

Because the economy is expected to decline with more job losses, Ryan said, discussions should be geared toward consolidating and centralizing services with municipalities and school districts to save taxpayers' money.

"If they look carefully, county government is not the problem," Ryan said. "We are the solution."