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## Clipping raises brings tax increase down

*Gerald McKinstry*  
*The Journal News*

WHITE PLAINS - By eliminating raises for commissioners and other managers, lawmakers were able to cut a tax rate increase by more than a percentage point.

The Westchester County Board of Legislators this week approved a \$1.77 billion budget that raises the county tax rate by 1.77 percent.

The final product was \$1.53 million lower than County Executive Andrew Spano's proposal, which would have translated into a 2.97 percent tax increase.

Of that, \$1.2 million was budgeted for pay increases, according to budget figures.

Scrapping those raises contributed to an overall reduction in spending, said Jose Alvarado, a Yonkers Democrat who chairs the board's budget committee.

"It is not that the raises aren't deserved, it is simply that the time is not right," Alvarado said in a statement released yesterday. "On a daily basis, I see firsthand the excellent work done by county employees, and this action of not granting pay raises at this time is not a reflection on their overall good work on behalf of county residents. This decision is a response to the economic realities that we are all facing today."

The county executive and legislators on Monday agreed to withdraw the controversial pay package after a public outcry.

Spano will not veto any changes and will soon sign off on the budget and changes, Deputy County Executive Larry Schwartz said.

"He's going to sign it today or tomorrow," Schwartz said. "This was a joint effort to get the tax levy down to 1.77 percent. The budget process is a collaboration and a compromise."

Legislators, by a 13-4 vote, approved it - all of the board's Republicans voted against it on the grounds that it still translated into a tax increase despite the spending cuts. They wanted a zero percent tax increase.

To get to the lower number, legislators trimmed \$6.8 million - which included much of the \$5.3 million they added during the final week of budget discussions. Legislators also reduced revenue expectation by \$833,000.

Those recommendations were made by the county's auditors and accepted by legislators, said Bob Boland, director of fiscal affairs for the county board.

"Most were driven by their suggestions," he said.

In addition to getting rid of the salary increases, other deletions included:

- \$357,799 from the Board of Legislators budget, including \$214,799 in salaries, \$75,000 in special studies and \$62,000 in contracts including a lobbyist;
- \$559,081 for community mental health, including \$155,000 for an Early Step Forward program and \$217,912 in grant money advances;
- \$500,000 in the Department of Health, with the bulk of the cuts in transportation for children with special needs - more than \$15.4 million remains for such transportation;
- \$900,000 in debt payments by not issuing bonds this year because of the market;
- \$250,000 in bus operating assistance;
- \$124,424 in cuts to the Westchester County Association, \$50,000 to Invest in Kids program and \$50,000 to the Westchester Library System;
- \$1 million of an \$86 million legal insurance fund;
- and \$1.3 million in retirement, FICA, medical and employee benefits.

Board Chairman William Ryan, D-White Plains, said the board took a "fundamentally sound proposal" from the county executive and trimmed it.

"We concluded after the first week, it was fiscally sound," Ryan said. "It didn't come with a tremendous amount of fat. It was clear to the board they had done a thorough job, department by department."

## Additional Facts

### **Kriss due in court in February**

Former Westchester Board of Legislators aide Gary Kriss is due back in White Plains City Court on Feb. 25 to answer misdemeanor charges that he misused the services of a subordinate for personal projects, county prosecutors said yesterday.

Kriss, 64, was arraigned on four theft of services charges on Nov. 10, and resigned his job later that day after 20 years with the board.

The charges followed a five-month probe by District Attorney Janet DiFiore that was prompted by a report in The Journal News on Kriss' taxpayer funded purchases, including thousands of dollars in electronics, software and books, with some of the items shipped to his home in South Salem. The purchases did not lead to criminal charges, but the investigation resulted in the theft charges. He was in court for a brief appearance yesterday and ordered to return on the February date.

- Jorge Fitz-Gibbon