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## Business group critical of Westchester budget may see \$124G in funding restored

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WHITE PLAINS - A business group critical of the county's proposed 2009 budget and failed plan to award raises to high level managers was itself a casualty of this year's cuts.

Then again, after some lobbying, it may not be.

The Westchester County Association lost all of its county funding - \$124,424 - for its work on international economic development in the county after the Board of Legislators cut it from the 2009 budget, an act that suggested retaliation against the group for being outspoken against lawmakers' spending plans.

But County Executive Andrew Spano and several legislators are now working to restore funds to the business group, The Journal News has learned.

The six-figure sum was "accidentally and inadvertently" removed from the budget, Deputy County Executive Larry Schwartz said yesterday, a view that is not shared by some Democrats and Republicans on the county board.

"I'm working to resolve the issue and restore a portion of the money that was accidentally removed," Schwartz said. "We're all working with Westchester County Association to rectify the matter."

Schwartz would not provide specifics, and negotiations are ongoing. Removing the association's funding was neither an accident nor retaliatory, said Legislator John Nonna, D-Plesantville. He said he and other legislators weren't sure of the benefits of funding the group.

"They get \$125,000 a year, and I don't know what they do," Nonna said. "In these economic times, should we be providing funds to a private entity? ... It's certainly not retaliation on my part - I agreed with what they said on raises. I just don't see what that money is used for on economic development."

The county association is a private business group that addresses public policy issues, economic development and advocates for business and nonprofits. It has long received a subsidy from the county for economic development.

The group was apparently not notified that it had been cut from a \$1.77 billion budget, which raises the tax rate by 1.77 percent. That plan was adopted Monday by a 13-4 vote, with the board's Republicans not supporting it.

Westchester County Association President William Mooney, who also served on a board-appointed compensation-advisory panel last year, and other members were outspoken during budget hearings - arguing the county budget did "not adequately address today's economic realities."

They called for more cuts and offered to take a 10 percent reduction themselves.

Mooney yesterday declined to discuss specifics of his conversations with county leaders because he has to speak with his board members first, he said.

Funds for the county association were in Spano's proposal, though they eventually were eliminated along with \$1.53 million in spending that legislators clipped.

Majority Leader Martin Rogowsky, D-Harrison, echoed Nonna's sentiments. He said legislators cut funds that weren't for "essential services" or provide an economic benefit to the county.

Legislators were also aware of the perception created by eliminating the funds, yet had to make difficult decisions, he said.

"Everyone wants us to tighten our belts, including the county association," Rogowsky said. "We were conscious (of the perception of cutting the money), but at some point you have to do the right thing. We felt it was important."

As far as restoring the contract, Rogowsky said the Democratic caucus had some very "frank discussions" with the county executive and was open to hearing specifics on a new contract.

"I believe there will be support for the county executive," Rogowsky said. "We want to hear back from the county executive."