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## Trimming fat wasn't priority in Westchester budget

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The Westchester County budget was passed the other day after it was trimmed by \$1.53 million, which might seem modest considering the final size of the spending plan stood at \$1.77 billion.

There was really no fat in it to begin with, reasoned Bill "Boss" Ryan, the chairman of the Board of Legislators who unfortunately has made a regular habit of straining the taxpayers' credulity.

I won't go through a long, tortured litany of what wasn't cut from the supposed lean and mean budget. But here's just a few things.

In a year that is expected to make the word "austerity" an understatement for most working people, they didn't cut the free cars reserved for County Executive Andy Spano and several commissioners and managers - including Spano's two lieutenants, Sue Tolchin and Larry Schwartz. Ryan kept his car, too.

They didn't cut the county's mounted police, a three-horse cavalry unit that was created mainly for the purpose of public relations.

No hiring freeze was put in place anywhere in county government.

No effort was made to scale back duplicative services like the Human Rights Commission. The dubious Tax Commission wasn't abolished and merged with the Finance Department, a suggestion that has been made over and over again by the powerless Republican minority on the Board of Legislators.

Nothing was seriously done to curtail overtime, a problem that was dramatically exemplified by the correction officer whose regular salary of \$106,597 ballooned to more than \$288,000 last year.

Not one cent was cut from the county's \$14.5 million subsidy to the Westchester County Medical Center which supports 30 - count 'em, 30 - well-paid vice presidents.

Other than \$357,000 carved out of Boss Ryan's bloated fiefdom on the eighth floor, the only significant cut was \$1 million or so in raises that Spano's ninth floor had hoped to give to scores of noncontractual employees, many of them commissioners. Spano attempted to slip those raises past everybody in a tour de force of doublespeak and only caved on the issue after intense public pressure forced him to do so.

It was the second salary flimflam in 12 months. Ryan tried a similar sleight of hand last December and he also got caught in the act.

There was another interesting but less obvious item cut from the budget - \$124,424 earmarked for the Westchester County Association.

The WCA is a highly respected and influential business organization whose membership of key executive leaders includes the publisher of this newspaper. Its chairman is Alfred DelBello, a former county executive and partner in the law firm of DelBello Donnellan Weingarten Wise & Wieder-kehr. The law firm is a major contributor to Spano's election campaigns.

The WCA president is William M. Mooney Jr., a man of unquestionable integrity, who has actively lived up to the organization's mission statement "to maintain a position as the center of influence for business advocacy issues on behalf of our membership as well as enhancing the economic vitality of the region."

Now, here's where it gets interesting. Mooney happened to be an outspoken critic in both pay-raise controversies.

During the Boss Ryan fiasco, he chaired the volunteer compensation advisory board that cited the worsening economy as the prime reason why the chairman's greedy attempt to raise his pay by 87 percent was unconscionable.

Ryan lost in the end.

Appraising Spano's 2009 budget, Mooney again said, "Taxpayers expect their elected officials to 'feel their pain' and respond accordingly." He said that delaying the \$1 million in raises "is the right message to send to a beleaguered constituency."

Spano lost that battle, just like the boss lost.

To demonstrate that the WCA itself should share some of the pain, Mooney recommended that the county cut its annual subsidy by 10 percent. But on Monday, Boss Ryan and the Democratic majority on the board cut the WCA's entire funding amount, a full 100 percent.

Was this revenge politics at work?

Ask the esteemed politicians in question and they'll tell you that adding 2 and 2 always comes up 5 and you must accept that answer with a straight face. The WCA budget cut was merely a six-figure accident, they say.

This is the sort of response that leaves you in the uncomfortable position of guessing whether they are venal or just incompetent.

That's the funny thing about county politics. Nothing is ever quite what it seems. After all, when it comes right down to it, a sound, philosophical argument could probably be made for doing away with public funding for the WCA.

But this is what we do know. We know that Schwartz, Spano's loyal deputy, was not happy with Mooney's call for a zero increase in the county levy.

Indeed, as I've already reported, Schwartz fired off one of his infamous "Larry-grams" in which he suggested that Mooney could do a true service to the county if he asked Entergy Corp., a member of the WCA, to continue its energy discount program as a significant cost-saving measure. Entergy had already turned Spano-Schwartz down, which was no surprise since the county executive has long expressed a desire to see the nuke operators shut down.

It's like saying, "Go to hell, but first give me some money."

Schwartz's request that Mooney intercede on the county's behalf came across as insincere.

Another thing we know is that at least part of the WCA funding is going to be restored. DelBello was spotted in the county office building, and it couldn't have been that he was just wishing everybody a merry Christmas.

Also, Spano caucused with the Democratic legislators, a very rare event. Word has it that he informed them of his intention to restore the funds they had just cut.

Schwartz told staff writer Gerry McKinstry that negotiations were underway to "rectify the matter."

All of this is weird.

But there is at least one lesson to be learned: it is exceedingly difficult to assume the role of public watchdog if you're accepting monetary support from the people you're dogging.

One way or another, they will put a choke collar around your neck and pull as hard as they can.