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Westchester's budget bullies

It's hardly surprising that the Westchester County Association saw its 2009 funding cut - all \$124,424 - after the Spano administration and the Board of Legislators finished their budget work. Earlier this year, WCA President William Mooney took money out of legislators' pockets, when a panel he chaired panned the overly generous stipend raises planned for legislators. In the latest budget debate, the WCA chief helped kill the retroactive raises that Spano sought for top commissioners and managers. Mooney's critical review of the pay hikes put pressure on the county board, usually the path of least resistance to the public trough.

Grateful taxpayers might regard the WCA as doing yeoman's work; government officials probably call it "biting the hand that feeds you." In a political environment where profiles in courage are scarce, the party doing the biting seldom emerges whole. Deputy County Executive Larry Schwartz said the WCA funding was cut "accidentally and inadvertently," adding that efforts were being made to "rectify" the matter. Legislators, however, sounded perfectly content playing the role of budget bullies.

"Everyone wants us to tighten our belts, including the county association," said board Majority Leader Martin Rogowsky, D-Harrison, who was among those stipend-chasing legislators chastened by Mooney's anti-raise antics earlier this year. "We were conscious (of the perception of retribution), but at some point you have to do the right thing. We felt it was important."

No ordinary outfit

In exchange for the taxpayer dollars, the WCA promotes international economic development in Westchester. An examination of what it delivers on that front is certainly relevant. It hardly seems likely, however, that any thoughtful analysis guided the budget-cutters. As Schwartz said, the cut came "accidentally and inadvertently," while legislators said the WCA absolutely deserved to have its sails clipped. "They get \$125,000 a year, and I don't know what they do," Legislator John Nonna, D-Pleasantville, told staff writer Gerald McKinstry.

What's perfectly clear is, the WCA has become a nagging thorn in the side of county government. Indeed, the organization has been a thoughtful but unrelenting critic on matters of taxation, government spending and all manner of largesse at the taxpayer's expense. This is in addition to its conducting highly regarded inquiries on county and regional public policy matters ranging from school taxes to health care and insurance reform, efforts that have yielded dollar-saving results in Albany. As the administration and Board of Legislators have doubtless learned, the WCA is no run-of-the mill booster organization for business. But conflict is inevitable - and untenable.

Conflict in the making

The WCA describes itself as "a business-based membership organization committed to addressing public policy issues with respect to business advocacy and economic development on behalf of the region's corporate and not-for-profit organizations." Its mission statement includes this: "The mission of The Westchester County Association is 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."

Therein, of course, is inherent conflict: In 2008, the biggest public policy question in Westchester - all of New York really - is taxation. It is for homeowners and business owners alike. Failure to solve that problem will doom the region - if the Wall Street collapse doesn't get there first. What worthy business or civic organization could broach the matter of taxation without coming in conflict with the Westchester government? What worthy business or civic organization could broach the matter of taxation without talking about spending by the county executive and Board of Legislators? Who needs a business or civic organization that would ignore either gorilla in the room?

Westchester needs more forceful and more thoughtful voices for change, the more independent the better. The WCA was forceful and thoughtful before the budget-cutters went to work; we would only expect more of that now that the budget bullies have had their way. The taxpayer will be the better for it.