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GOVERNMENT | WHITE PLAINS

# Legislators Approve Budget Without Raises

By NICOLE NEROULIAS

WHITE PLAINS

AFTER weeks of mounting public outcry about a 2009 budget proposal that would have included raises for some county employees, Westchester legislators approved a slightly smaller budget without the raises late Monday night.

The \$1.8 billion budget, about \$1.5 million less than the proposal submitted by County Executive [Andrew J. Spano](#) on Nov. 14, will increase the county portion of property taxes — about one-sixth of an average resident's bill — by 1.8 percent, rather than 3 percent as Mr. Spano had proposed.

“I fear the economy will get worse before it gets better,” Mr. Spano said in a statement released before the Monday vote, withdrawing his proposed pay raises for commissioners and managers. The proposed retroactive 3.25 percent raises for commissioners and department heads amounted to about \$780,000 more in pay and \$110,000 in retirement benefits, totaling about \$890,000.

“They have done an outstanding job and if times were better, they would be getting the increase they deserve,” Mr. Spano said. “But we all have to tighten our belts in times like this — and sometimes that hurts.”

The conciliatory gesture came as too little, too late for some of Mr. Spano's vocal critics, especially members of Rethinking Westchester Government, a new group that wants to eliminate New York's county governments, as have Connecticut and Massachusetts. Connecticut got

rid of all its county governments in 1960 and Massachusetts abolished most of its in the late 1990s.

One of the group's founders, Paul J. Feiner, a former county legislator and now the Greenburgh town supervisor, said services could be provided more efficiently at the state and local levels.

"Westchester County is becoming very unaffordable," he said. "It's driving people out of the county, and people can't even sell their homes these days."

Mr. Feiner's remarks during the public hearings process offended some legislators, including Kenneth W. Jenkins of Yonkers, who noted that Greenburgh's proposed 2009 budget, scheduled for a vote this week, would result in a 7.7 percent tax increase for residents of unincorporated areas of the town and nearly 10 percent for residents of its villages.

"Get your house in order first before you step out and speak to anybody else," Mr. Jenkins said, before casting his vote in favor of the county budget, which passed, 13 to 4.

IN a response Tuesday morning, Mr. Feiner said municipalities have far fewer options for painless cuts than at the county level.

"People don't want to see the town pool closed in the summer," he said. "People feel we shouldn't be cutting police when the economy is bad. If you cut \$400,000 from the town, you're cutting major programs. If you cut \$400,000 from the county executive's bodyguards, the only ones feeling it are the bodyguards and the county executive."

Mr. Spano's proposal was \$101,000 below this year's budget, but the county executive had argued that a tax increase was unavoidable because of the anticipated \$26.3 million shortfall in mortgage taxes, state aid and interest income and a \$20.5 million jump in fuel, utility and [Medicaid](#) costs. More than 70 percent of the budget consists of mandated expenses, he added.

But citing the economic downturn, with area residents hit hard by job losses on Wall Street and by the housing market crisis, the [League of Women Voters](#) and the Westchester County Association, a business advocacy group, had also called on the board to flatten or reduce taxes.

“Any increase is unacceptable at this point in time, when you see the number of people losing their jobs,” said William M. Mooney Jr., the association’s president.

The board’s four Republicans agreed, voting against the budget, which they say could have made additional cuts to legislator stipends, the county’s mounted police force and Mr. Spano’s security detail, among other programs. Mr. Spano’s security detail was cut by 15 percent, which was in his initial proposal.

“Given the economic times, given the uncertainties, we could not support any tax increase this year,” said Legislator George Oros, the board’s minority leader.

Mary Beth Gose, president of the League of Women Voters of Westchester, said her group was disappointed by the tax increase, but “somewhat relieved” by the changes to Mr. Spano’s initial proposal. Next year, she said, the county executive should prepare his budget earlier so the public has at least a month to study it and make suggestions.

“It’s a complex budget, and it’s important for people to understand what’s under consideration and what the county government does,” she said.

Democrats and Republicans on the board agreed that next year, they would solicit more input on ways to consolidate services and explore private-public partnerships, striving to save taxpayers money without seriously hurting their standard of living.

Eliminating 52 vacant county positions this year was an acceptable sacrifice, but layoffs and other draconian measures should only be a last

resort if the recession continues, said Legislator Jose I. Alvarado, chairman of the board's budget committee.

"We are not firing anybody, everyone is staying put and hopefully hanging around with us as things get better," said Mr. Alvarado, a self-described optimist. "I think things will turn around. Everything is cyclical."

Last week, the legislators added \$5.3 million to Mr. Spano's proposed budget, primarily for community services for the county's neediest residents.

In addition to reinstating financing for public day care centers and mental health programs, the amount also included about \$500,000 each for the [Legal Aid Society](#), which provides lawyers for residents who cannot afford them, and the [Westchester Arts Council](#), whose programs provide educational and tourism benefits for the county.

The legislators were able to add the money while lowering the tax levy because they also increased anticipated revenue by \$5.8 million, after consulting with the board's auditors about projected income from taxes and county agencies.