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Westchester County Association votes to reject county funds

*Jonathan Bandler
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Keep the money.

That was the message from the Westchester County Association yesterday when it told officials not to bother trying to restore any of the economic development funds that were cut from the group in next year's county budget.

The private group's executive committee voted not to accept the funds if offered because its mission on behalf of the business community could be compromised - even though it has taken the money for years - and because "organizations such as WCA may not be the most appropriate recipients of county taxpayer dollars given today's economy."

"For the first time, I had a different viewpoint: Does it stop you from being independent?" said William Mooney Jr., president of the association. "It raised the whole philosophical point that it's probably not the best idea for us to be accepting money from the government if we're an advocacy group."

The Board of Legislators last week cut the group's entire county funding, \$124,424, leading to speculation that the ax had swung because of the association's outspoken criticism that county officials did not try hard enough to keep spending in check.

Deputy County Executive Larry Schwartz insisted the money had been "inadvertently" removed from the spending plan and negotiations began between the executive's office and the association to create a new contract. Some board members, however, indicated they knew exactly what they were doing when they cut the funding. They suggested the money did not represent essential services that had to be funded as part of the \$1.77 billion budget the board passed last week.

"It wasn't about anything else. It was that there were people (on the board) who didn't know what the county association brought to the table," Legislator Ken Jenkins said.

Susan Tolchin, chief adviser to County Executive Andrew Spano, said yesterday that negotiations about the funding that had gone on since Thursday were no longer necessary.

"We respect their decision ... these are tough economic times," Tolchin said of the association. "We appreciate what they do for the county, and we'll continue to work with them."

The contract with the county would have paid for consulting services in international business relations. The money represents just under 10 percent of the association's nearly \$1.3 million annual budget. It funded a salaried position in the association, but Mooney said that employee would get new responsibilities.

Mooney was critical this year of plans for pay raises for county legislators and for commissioners and other managers. But he said he had no way of knowing whether that played into the decision to cut his group's funding.

"I can't read anybody else's mind. It would be foolhardy to try," he said. "Someone asked me if I was angry (that the funds were cut). It was more that I was bewildered. Why all of a sudden was it being questioned now if it was there for nine or 10 years and no one had a problem with it?"

He said the association will continue to work closely with Westchester officials to make the county a competitive economic community that can keep existing businesses and attract new ones.