

February 15, 2008

A pick for taxpayers

When we last checked in with the Westchester County Board of Legislators, the part-time lawmakers had finally gotten a whiff of a very foul-smelling coffee and said "No" to a sneaky, last-minute pay raise that had sullied their chairman, William Ryan, and threatened to dishonor the entire body. But the issue of lawmaker pay checks never really went away; board leaders promised to convene an independent commission to study and recommend appropriate compensation for lawmakers. Good news came this week, the announcement that William M. Mooney Jr., president of the Westchester County Association business group, will chair the panel. With Mooney at the helm, lawmakers would have to jump through fire rings before the panel ever recommended any overly generous, you-must-be-kidding raises.



Mooney, an ex-banker with nearly a half-century of related experience in our region, has led the well-regarded WCA since 2003. On his watch, the organization has gone beyond the bounds of the typical business advocacy and become a coherent, non-ideological voice on the major public-policy matters affecting the Lower Hudson Valley. WCA was among the first business groups to appreciate the job-killing nature of our failed health-care delivery system, as well as the positive role government must play to make health care more affordable and accessible. Hard work by the WCA has already resulted in some cost-saving reforms benefiting businesses and consumers alike, and it continues to press Albany for more fixes.

Where Mooney and the WCA have made the most noise is over property taxes. In October, a WCA study group released an "initial report" on Westchester property taxes that went beyond commenting on the obvious - that sky-high bills threaten the vitality of the region - and identified a series of areas ripe for cost-savings, among them public-employee salaries, pensions and other benefits. "Generous pay and benefits used to be considered necessary for low paying school and government jobs," the panel wrote. "This is not the case anymore." The WCA renewed 20-year-old pleas for more government cost-sharing, consolidation and privatization.

More recently, in December, the WCA spoke directly to lawmaker compensation, when the county board was contemplating \$3,000 stipend increases for members in leadership posts - either a 25 percent or 33 percent raise - depending on the position, and a \$35,000 boost in the board chairman's stipend, an increase of 87 percent. All lawmakers receive a base salary of \$49,200. From Mooney: "It's time to put an end to this unrealistic standard of compensation and overly generous benefits for these elected officials. It's another example of how the public sector is utterly out of sync with economic realities. It's also a type of spending that adds to the county's already high property tax burden that is making it difficult to attract and retain businesses."

Now that's a proper starting point for a discussion about lawmaker compensation; it's where the pay debate should have commenced in December, and in 2005, when lawmakers last approved a pay hike. Credit to Chairman Ryan for making the Mooney pick. Evidence that the apoplectic taxpayer is being heard? We hope. We'll have more later on the panel's business. And we hope to hear from Mooney as well.