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## Spano sets off "stink bombs" in Westchester budget

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Andy Spano's favorite expression from his old man was, "Watch the hands, not the mouth," meaning that actions speak louder than words.

After reading some of the particulars in Spano's swan-song \$1.8 billion budget proposal, Westchester County Executive-elect Rob Astorino may think those hands are directly pointed at him — with middle-fingers raised in a double-barreled salute.

Calling for a 4.89 percent property tax increase, the 2010 budget is larded with little stink bombs.

Like a scene out of Monty Python's "The Meaning of Life," the accountants are in revolt. Indeed the Westchester County Association has assembled an independent team of CPAs to tear the spending plan apart.

One of the more odoriferous parting "gifts" is a \$7.6 million revenue projection for the Medical Examiner's Office — an astounding increase of nearly \$6 million.

It's all the more astounding because nobody seems to quite know how that figure was arrived at.

For next year's budget, Spano said he saved \$2.4 million by eliminating 37 jobs, 34 of which were already vacant. As a cost-cutting measure, those jobs are as fake as decorative scarecrows at Halloween. They only look real from a distance.

In his initial budget announcement, Spano said all county employees would be asked to take a one-week, unpaid furlough, a sacrifice that would save the taxpayers \$5.5 million.

Well, now we know that isn't exactly true. It turns out that money will be reimbursed upon retirement and at whatever rate of pay the employees happen to be earning at the time they leave the job. So for example, if a furloughed worker earns, say, \$1,000 a week and retires down the road at \$1,200 a week, the reimbursement will be the higher amount of \$1,200.

Legislator George Oros, R-Cortlandt, among others, immediately saw the Spano hands at work.

"What happened here obviously is that when Spano got back from his Florida trip after Election Day, he said, 'Let's put some land mines in here for Astorino,' " Oros said.

Inflating revenues to give the appearance of a balanced budget, he said, will only come around to bite taxpayers in the butt "in the middle of September next year when all of a sudden you don't have enough money to pay the bills."

Oros noted that the Spano budget also eliminated "tax levy dollars" for Playland. He interpreted that as a direct swipe at Astorino, who during the campaign repeatedly brought up the fact that the amusement park lost \$37 million in the past 10 years, and \$5 million alone last year.

If all is fair in love and politics, then Astorino may have had that one coming to him.

Nevertheless, critics say that in fairness Spano, who admitted that Astorino's anti-tax drumbeat resonated with voters, should have consulted with the county executive-elect before releasing the budget.

"If you really believe Andy Spano's statement that he got the message, he should have brought the messenger in," said Mike Edelman, a political consultant.

For now the ball is in the court of the Board of Legislators, of which 13 of its 17 members are Democrats. They've heard the voters, too — and more than one of them barely got re-elected.

Cooperating with Astorino will be a delicate and necessary process.

"He's going to be stuck with this budget just like we're going to be stuck with this budget," said Legislator John Nonna, D-Pleasantville. "I think we have to find common ground."