

County budget criticized

John Golden

Nov-20-09,

Heeding the recent message from voters at the polls, outgoing Westchester County Executive Andrew J. Spano last week proposed a 2010 county budget of about \$1.82 billion that calls for employee furloughs and other cost-cutting measures and leaves decisions on executive staffing and added funding for those posts to his victorious election opponent.

Despite the spending cuts, the budget submitted to county legislators will result in a 4.9 percent increase in the tax levy. One legislator last week said that tax hike was “unacceptable.”

Westchester County Association officials also called Spano’s budget proposal unacceptable. “At a time when everyone has made painful sacrifices to survive this deep recession, the county has not taken the necessary steps,” said WCA President William Mooney. “Westchester’s taxpayers are at the breaking point and cannot afford yet another tax increase.”

A team of independent certified public accountants is reviewing the budget to help the WCA recommend policy changes that yield additional savings and eliminate another property tax increase for property owners.

Spano said the hike is needed to offset a projected \$50.9 million drop in revenue, including an estimated \$45.6 million shortfall in anticipated sales taxes budgeted this year, and a \$70.2 million increase in county expenses, including \$37.6 million in added pension and employee health insurance costs.

Spano said the levy hike would add an average of \$100 to homeowners’ tax bills, though the increase will vary by municipality according to local property tax equalization rates.

He said the incoming county executive, Rob Astorino, was not consulted in the budgetmaking after his Republican challenger’s upset victory this month. The budget, however, cuts some spending for which Astorino criticized the three-term Democrat in the campaign, including the county executive’s three-officer security detail and his official car.

“It’s less to do with him (Astorino) than it has to do with the message that I thought I got in the campaign” from voters. “I got my butt whipped on certain issues ... This budget reflects that.”

Spano proposed to save \$5.5 million next year by requiring most county employees to take an unpaid five-day work furlough. Furloughed employees, however, would receive deferred payments for those days when they retire from or leave county employment, he said.

The furlough would not apply to public safety and correction workers, criminal investigators, elected officials and Board of Legislators staff. Spano said he was barred by law from ordering the furlough for elected officials, but urged legislators to impose the furloughs on their staffs too.

Spano said he expected union officials representing county employees to go along with the furlough proposal.

The county expects to save \$12.5 million in 2010 by ending its subsidy for the Westchester Medical Center.

Increasing the fee structure for county Department of Labs and Research services is expected to raise an additional \$4.7 million in revenue.

The executive budget includes only one-month funding for nine senior-level posts in the county executive's office and five deputy commissioners, at a \$1.5 million saving, though those job titles will remain in the budget. Spano said that will allow staff structure and size to be decided by Astorino, who will have to seek any additional funding from legislators.

"The one thing that's very clear to me is that I will not be negotiating this with the Board of Legislators," Spano said in a rare moment of levity at what could be his last press conference.

County Legislator Michael B. Kaplowitz, D-Somers, in his comments on Spano's proposed budget release suggested the departing county executive might not have heard voters' message clearly enough.

"The taxpayers have spoken. We must do better," said Kaplowitz, board vice chairman and a certified financial planner, calling the nearly 4.9 percent tax hike "unacceptable."

The county will have to cut an additional \$26 million from the budget to avoid any tax increase, he said.

"Some difficult decisions will have to be made. But if we are going to get this number down, everyone is going to have to sacrifice," he said. "We must share the pain in order to share the gain. That means ratcheting down government expenses to meet reduced revenues."