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## Westchester budget draws packed room, impassioned debate on taxes vs. services

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WHITE PLAINS — Westchester County lawmakers shouldn't raise taxes in next year's budget — any increase is too high and unacceptable, many residents and business leaders say.

Others, however, warn that cutting vital social services would hurt some of the county's most vulnerable populations: seniors, youth, the disabled, women and others in need.

Hundreds of people turned out to a standing-room-only public hearing Thursday night on County Executive Andrew Spano's \$1.8 billion budget proposal for 2010, which would increase taxes by 4.9 percent.

Some residents cited the importance of particular county programs and of funding nonprofits affecting child care, health care, domestic violence and other social service programs, while others maintained that it was important to intelligently shrink the size of government and any potential tax increase.

"From our perspective, anything more than zero is totally unacceptable," said William Mooney, president of the Westchester County Association, a business group that has been reviewing the budget and making recommendations for several years. "Every business and household in this nation has adjusted their expenditures in response to lower revenues, and government needs to do the same.

"The economic crisis we find ourselves in is hardly a surprise, and our legislators should have taken the fiscally responsible decisions long before today," Mooney said.

Raymond Adams, a White Plains man affiliated with Greenburgh Health Center, said that while he understood the economic realities, cutting funding for community services and health care was "reckless and radically irresponsible."

"Communities that cannot care for their sick and their elderly are destined to fail," he said.

After weeks of review, the county Board of Legislators is going over spending cuts and additions.

The board is expected to approve a budget Monday.

In recent weeks, many good-government and business groups have offered their own recommendations with similar conclusions: There should be no tax increase, revenue projections are high and some sort of reorganization or consolidation must be considered if efficiencies are to be found.

Six Democratic legislators this week pitched a plan that would eliminate 51 management positions, mostly higher-level ones not represented by unions, and merge 36 departments into 19, saving about \$7.5 million.

In that plan, the Office for Women, for example, would lose its director, saving \$102,997.

Those dollars shouldn't be slashed, said Kenneth Donato, a member of the Westchester County Chiefs of Police.

"Domestic violence is a crime, it's not a social service issue," he said. "The Office (for) Women ensures that victims are served on a personal level."

John Waltman, a financial analyst with the county responsible for debt management whose position also was slated for elimination under that proposal, said that plan was shortsighted, in part because in his position he has saved taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars.

"There are many things that I do that many of you will never see or know about," he said. "This is not something that is done easily, and very few people know how to do it."

The League of Women Voters of Westchester, which has also called for no tax increase, said lawmakers should pursue government reorganization but cautioned against rushing a plan because it "cannot be achieved in a scant six weeks," said League President Adelaise DiGiorgi.

DiGiorgi and other League members also challenged legislators' assumptions that they are already operating efficiently.

"The League questions this assumption and urges the (county board) and the county administration to critically analyze the current array of county services, holding the provision of services to ensure the health and safety of county residents in higher priority," said Noreen Fisher, a member of the League and former Scarsdale mayor, "and determine which areas can be reorganized, pared back or eliminated."