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Take time to get Westchester budget cuts right

These days it seems there is barely anyone left in Westchester County who hasn't put together a plan on how to cut the 2010 budget and restructure county government. There have been so many competing plans formulated and presented during this budget season that it's hard to keep track. Some of the plans are well thought-out, others quickly jerry-rigged to mirror the times. One thing is for sure: Republican Rob Astorino's surprising victory in the overwhelmingly Democratic county has even die-hard advocates of government services pulling out their scalpels.

Suddenly, those who rarely complained about the expanding reach of county government have jumped on the restructure-the-beast bandwagon. For some, the motivation is surely political (there's more jockeying in White Plains than at Yonkers Raceway), but there is also good reason: the \$1.8 billion budget that outgoing Westchester County Executive Andrew Spano proposed last month is short on revenue and long on spending. And the projected 4.9 percent tax levy increase could rise much higher if sales and other tax revenues fall short of projections.

Astorino, a former county legislator who campaigned on cutting taxes, may inherit an already downsized county government when he takes office Jan. 1. First, the county executive's office was stripped to bare-bones staffing under Spano's budget proposal, and now a cadre of Democratic legislators is rushing to consolidate county departments. These ill-considered moves would hamstring the new county executive in a way that is hardly fair — to Astorino, to the voters or to the taxpayers.

Indeed, there's plenty of reason to streamline county government; that surely is a key reason why Astorino was elected in a romp. But the new county executive should certainly have a hand in any dramatic restructuring; moreover, there should be serious consideration of all costs involved, not just the monetary savings. There is little evidence of such studied inquiry so far, certainly very little public discussion. And there is scant prospect of conducting such inquiry prior to Monday's planned budget vote.

Stealing thunder

"It's good that they found religion," Astorino told the Editorial Board last week, referring to the lawmakers rushing to cut. "I'm glad they heard the call loud and clear. I'm going to need them."

Astorino said he is reluctant to criticize the actions of a county board with which he hopes to have good relations. But he made plain that he was surprised that a group of six Democratic legislators, led by Michael Kaplowitz of Somers, had proposed deep staff cuts and consolidations without first reaching out to him. (The legislators' cuts came after Spano had already eliminated six of eight senior policy-making positions in the County Executive's Office.) "I got a call just before the press conference, the night before," Astorino said. "There's some big concerns, but I'm not part of the process yet. Whatever they decide, I'll live with."

Under the legislators' plan, the number of county departments would be cut almost in half, from 36 to 19, and some high-paid commissioners, deputies and support staff would be reduced accordingly. All told, there would be 51 positions cut, for an immediate savings of \$7.5 million, with line-by-line budget cuts to follow. Kaplowitz announced the plan at a Tuesday press conference alongside Democratic Legislators Ken Jenkins, Judy Meyers, John Nonna, Bill Burton and Peter Harckham. Kaplowitz said the group was spurred to act by the "stark realization" that there was a \$45 million tax hole — from overestimated sales tax revenue — in Spano's proposed budget. "If Andy Spano was

(re-elected) today, the six of us would still be standing here today," Kaplowitz told the Editorial Board. "Forty-five million dollars is not a little ripple. It's a tsunami."

Board Chairman William Ryan was skeptical. "This is a long laundry list of management cuts put forth without analysis and no indication as to whether or not it will improve government or hurt it," he said after the Kaplowitz group released its plan. "In fairness to the new county executive, to do something in haste hinders the new administration in achieving stability they need to get the work done."

Short notice on plans

Under the county charter, the board has the right to cut the budget and abolish positions, and it can do so when the budget is voted upon on Monday. Though outgoing County Executive Spano has veto rights, the board doesn't need, or apparently want, the approval of the county executive-elect. It is, however, unclear if Team Kaplowitz has enough support to push its plan through.

Both George Oros, R-Cortlandt, the GOP minority leader, and Thomas Abinanti, D-Greenburgh, loudly opposed the changes. Oros complained that it was "concocted behind closed doors." Abinanti told his colleagues in a memo, "The Board of Legislators has neither the knowledge of the intricate workings of the individual county departments and offices nor the expertise to successfully blend their separate operations." He added: "We need to collaborate with the new county administration, department heads, legal counsel and others trained in reorganization to make the merger of departments and offices functionally and financially advantageous."

No shortage of ideas

Citizen and business groups have also made recommendations. The Citizens Budget Advisory Committee, a volunteer group that reviews the proposed budget annually, is calling for consolidated services and merged departments, too. Its plan seeks to replace 31 commissioners with a total of six deputy county executives; merge some departments; and consolidate positions, such as the communications positions now spread across 11 different offices.

The Scarsdale Town and Village Civic Club also issued a report, calling for the merger of some departments and a rollback in the county's work force, along with \$40 million to \$50 million in spending cuts. Spano's proposed budget, the panel said, was "built on risky revenue and cost assumptions," including that the county Labs & Research Department would increase its revenues by \$6 million, for no apparent reason.

More advice comes from the business community. William Mooney Jr., president of the Westchester County Association, a public policy and business group, called for zero-based budgeting and a re-examination of the compensation and benefits paid to public-sector employees (although, for most government workers, that is ground covered in collective bargaining, not in an annual budget).

Little time for study

The League of Women Voters of Westchester, as with other civic groups, called for a change in the budget proposal timeline. There was just four weeks between the time the budget was released on Nov. 16 and when it's scheduled to be voted upon on Monday. By state law, the budget must be passed by Dec. 27. "This schedule doesn't allow time for analysis and study of this very complex document," said league President Adelaide DiGiorgi.

The League also called for the creation of a citizens' task force to look at restructuring county government. "It is the kind of thing we are going to have to do," DiGiorgi said. "But we can't do it overnight. It needs a broader base, and this business of not bringing in the department representatives and not bringing in the county exec-elect, that's got to change."

It is past time to take the voters and taxpayers of Westchester seriously; it is foolhardy, however, to proceed as if hastily conceived cuts comport with the wishes of voters or the county executive in waiting. The board should take the time to get it right.