



## Astorino looks for budget savings

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Now that the Westchester County Board of Legislators approved a budget for 2010, it's up to the incoming administration to live with it and find more savings.

The county board, in a rare 9-8 bipartisan split, adopted a \$1.8 billion budget on Monday that raises taxes by 2.9 percent and calls on County Executive-elect Rob Astorino to come up with a plan to consolidate county government by March 31.

"The budget I'm handed is the one I'll deal with," Astorino said Tuesday. "The one thing we know is our financial problems are serious and likely to be much worse next year."

The budget is \$1 million less than outgoing County Executive Andrew Spano's proposal, though some numbers are far different because of changes in revenue expectations and budget lines.

The county board, for example, abandoned a deferred payment proposal, or furlough, and the expected \$5.5 million savings because it simply put off expenses to the future. The board also changed millions in revenue projections and cut many departments — some by as much as 10 percent.

The board eliminated \$12 million for Westchester Medical Center; merged the departments of health and community mental health, and sliced dozens of positions that are vacant or expected to become vacant next year, among many other cuts.

Medical Center officials say they will need to trim operating costs to make up for the lost county revenue. Hospital president and CEO Michael Israel called the county's cuts "disappointing."

"The last thing we want to do is eliminate jobs and close programs, but we've just gotten \$12 million taken out of our revenue stream overnight and we have to do what is appropriate," Israel said.

Hospital officials are looking at all programs to figure out where to save money, including one that provides medical care to inmates at the county jail, which is on the same campus in Valhalla.

While the board changed Spano's proposal and his 4.9 percent tax increase, many groups, including the Westchester County Association and League of Women Voters of Westchester, said no tax increase was appropriate in these economic times.

The vote showed that most legislators "don't get it," despite claims that they do, said William Mooney, the WCA's president.

"It's hard to imagine that on nearly a \$2 billion budget, the board lacked the political courage and will to make the necessary reductions to come up with a budget that responds to the needs of the taxpayers," Mooney said in a statement. "It is hopeful that when the new Astorino administration takes office in January, there will be significant progress in getting county government's fiscal house in order."

Astorino said there were no real surprises in the final document and welcomed calls for consolidation.

Astorino, who campaigned on shrinking the size of government, said he would work with board members on a plan, particularly because many mergers require a change of the county charter.

"I'm glad this board is part of the process," Astorino said. "I'm going to use their expertise and I'm going to need their help."

Several legislators had put forth a specific consolidation plan days before the budget vote that would have eliminated 51 management positions and merged 36 departments. That plan unravelled, though — many board members said that given the complexity of mergers, it needed a better look and shouldn't be rushed through. The proposal did, however, encourage some managers to come forward with more budget cuts, several legislators said.

Going forward, Astorino said, he'd like to lengthen the period of time the public and leaders have to study the budget. This year, Spano released his proposal on Nov. 16 — as stipulated by state law — effectively giving people four weeks to analyze its details.

"The biggest problem is the budget process itself. There's only five weeks for the board to digest this document," Astorino said. "The budget process is broken."