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Astorino wants managers to pay toward health care

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TARRYTOWN — With a goal of aligning government pay with the private sector, County Executive Robert Astorino is calling on managers and elected leaders to kick in to their health-care costs — but he needs the support of the Board of Legislators.

Having nonunion managers, commissioners and elected officials contribute 15 percent to their health-care plans "is about restoring a financial equilibrium to the county," said Astorino, who announced his proposal Thursday before 500 people — mostly business leaders — at the Westchester County Association's annual breakfast.

"As a matter of fairness, this practice has to change," Astorino said of having taxpayers cover all of a worker's health benefits. "This legislation is a first step toward returning to Westchester the proper and rightful balance between spending and taxes."

In pitching this, the Republican executive also sends a message to unions that they can expect this proviso to be part of future negotiations.

Board Chairman Ken Jenkins, D-Yonkers, promised to give it a thorough review in different committees and analyze its impact on taxpayers and county workers.

"It sounds great on a sound bite, but we must get to the guts of the proposal," Jenkins said. "We're not going to pooh-pooh any proposals. We've got to do the due diligence and the work."

One potential problem, as Jenkins sees it, is that many of these managers haven't had raises in three years, and some make less than union members they manage.

Having them pay a percentage of their health-care costs is effectively a pay cut, Jenkins said.

"We need to address the overall cost of government," he said. "It's going to be a long process."

Astorino said difficult economic times require tough decisions.

The proposed legislation, the Astorino administration's first, is headed to the county board for review. It affects 400 workers and would cost employees anywhere from \$1,200 to \$3,300, depending on whether they have an individual or family plan. It also affects nonunion employees at Westchester Community College and the District Attorney's Office. It's expected to save \$1.2 million a year.

In the past decade, the cost of providing health care to workers has more than doubled to \$149 million from \$67 million, Astorino said. Family coverage for a worker costs taxpayers \$22,057, and it's \$7,992 for individuals, he said.

Karen Pecora, president of Civil Service Employees Association Unit 9200, the county's largest union, said she "anticipates it will be an issue" in negotiations but that it was too early to start talks as they have a contract through 2011.

The proposal was met with applause by many at the business breakfast.

Stephen McCulloch, senior director at Houlihan-Parnes/ iCap Realty Advisors in White Plains, said Astorino's address was a "breath of fresh air."

"It's terrific," McCulloch said of the health-care plan. "The private sector has been doing it for some time."

William Mooney, president of WCA, said members are encouraged by the conversation and look forward to working with the Astorino administration.

"This is a pretty pivotal time for Westchester County," he said.