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Legislators must end delay

Members of the Westchester Board of Legislators sound more recalcitrant, more tone-deaf and more obstructionist with each passing day that they delay action on the county executive's proposal to make nonunion managers contribute toward the cost of their health insurance. Moreover, the rising decibel levels over their slow action obscures even bigger questions about rising health-care costs. They should give Rob Astorino the authority he seeks, while pursuing in earnest the bigger, more important questions about exploding health-care costs.

It should be no mystery in 2010 that taxpayers, who are the principals, want government workers, who are the agents, to contribute toward the cost of their health insurance. Surely, legislators don't need another survey to appreciate that taxpayers want government workers to chip in. Why else would so many angry voters be brandishing pitchforks? Westchester is one of just a handful of New York counties not requiring employee contributions. Nationwide, a growing number of recession -shocked government employers are appreciating that the status quo on health-care is unsustainable.

The Center for State and Local Government Excellence reported last month that half of state and local governments surveyed had, since the recession began, increased employee contributions toward their health-care costs, added cost-saving wellness programs, reduced or tiered benefits, or decreased employer contributions. Rest assured, compelling employee contributions — from supervisors and represented workers employees alike — is low-hanging policy fruit in Westchester. The defense-playing legislators should get this done, so they can move on to the bigger fish.

The real money

In response to Astorino's call for his managers to chip in, defense-playing legislators have properly questioned whether a comprehensive review might yield substantially more health-care savings, something on the magnitude of \$15 million to \$20 million. Given the steady rise in the county's health-care costs, it boggles the mind that such inquiry is not already the charge of some longstanding legislative-executive branch committee, and paying out handsome dividends. Westchester would be ripe for savings — and not just by making employees pay in.

Indeed, Astorino's proposal for contributions would reach some 400 managers and save an estimated \$1.2 million, but it wouldn't make a dent in the county's overall tab for health care, which stands at \$148.8 million — better than twice the \$66.9 million paid in 2000. Even if the county eventually compels all government workers — union and nonunion alike — to contribute, taxpayers and county workers will continue to lose, if nothing is done to check costs. Taxpayers want employees to contribute, but they also want somebody — in this case the county — to do something about the overall bill.

Related interests

On Friday, William Mooney, the president of the Westchester County Association, criticized the legislators for moving "at the speed of a glacier." He said that no additional study was needed on the health-care contribution bill, only action. But his group should also get behind the board's companion efforts to check overall health insurance costs, called the "most important issue to (Westchester) business owners followed by property tax reform," according to WCA survey results reported last month. Again, taxpayers want both employee contributions *and* cost-savings.

No doubt spurred by the hue and cry over the Board of Legislators' slow action on Astorino's proposal, the lawmakers' Special Committee on Health Insurance Savings met Saturday "to begin reviewing, analyzing and making final recommendations on the fairest and most economic policy that the County can (achieve to) provide taxpayers long-term savings, while continuing to provide its employees with quality health care coverage." Concurrently, the Astorino administration apparently is engaging in a "full scale review of the insurance plan," according to correspondence Monday from legislators.

Board Chairman Ken Jenkins said the legislators aim to put forth their cost-savings recommendations in short order — in March. All this attention to the health-care dilemma is for the better. It would be better still if the legislators and Astorino's team were working together, to arrive at the same destination: a better deal for taxpayers. In any case, we should hold them all accountable for delivering bankable results.