



Union concessions have saved taxpayers millions

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As president of the Westchester County Correction Superior Officers Association, I must respond to recent comments by The Journal News, the Westchester County Association and Westchester County Executive Rob Astorino with regard to county employees and their benefits.

Pointing fingers at civil service employees and somehow blaming us for the tax problems in Westchester County is wrong and unfair. I have read many comments in the paper over the last two months by different people indicating that unions must contribute more money toward health care and other benefits we have. These comments only tell half the story.

Any benefit county employees have gotten was through contract negotiations, where the process is give-and-take. I can speak first-hand to my experience as union president; I have negotiated many contracts with three different county executives. Unions representing uniformed staff at the Westchester jail have negotiated contracts and we have given in on some key issues that eventually saved the county and its taxpayers millions of dollars every year for the last eight years. These "givebacks" are still in effect and the county continues to save millions of dollars every year.

Implying or indicating that unions are greedy or irresponsible is wrong. I have worked closely and responsibly with the previous county executive, Andy Spano, over the last 12 years to negotiate contracts that resulted in fair agreements for my membership and the taxpayers. I ask you to understand that as a union leader I negotiate fairly on behalf of my membership, but I think it is unfair to judge us by one clause in our contract without understanding the give-and-take that has gone on for years.

The Journal News recently reported on the county's paying employees for their unused sick days. County Executive Astorino seems to think this is a bad policy. (Astorino has

proposed new restrictions on the number of unused sick and vacation days for which nonunion managers can receive payment, with an eye toward asking the same of union personnel. — Editor.) On the surface it appears the county is giving money away when it pays out sick time at a rate of 50 percent of its value at retirement. This clause has been in our contract for more than 25 years.

County officials have never attempted to change this policy in years past because, once the numbers are all run through the calculators, they realize they are making money off this contract provision. The "Sick, buy out clause" in our contract has saved the county millions of dollars over the last 25 years. Let me explain — the county jail is staffed with officers 24 hours a day, seven days a week, including holidays. The payout policy actually is an incentive for employees not to use their sick time; the county knows it is making money every time it prevents a person from calling in sick. If employees call in sick they receive their full salary and their post must be filled by another officer at a rate of time-and-half pay.

To fill that one slot for a day costs the county 2 1/2 times a salary if an employee calls in sick and the post is backfilled. However, if the employees do not call in sick and save their sick time, they then are paid at a rate of 50 percent of the value of that sick day upon retirement. This policy was negotiated by county officials many years ago because they had vision and realized that paying out sick time at half-pay would save the county millions of dollars.

The point I am trying to make is, everything isn't always what it seems on the surface. It is important to know that we understand the economy is bad, but we also know what we have done over the years to help the county and the taxpayers of Westchester County to save millions of dollars. What I won't do is negotiate the terms of our contract in the media.

Allow us to do our job with dignity and to negotiate a fair and equitable contract with the county executive and his administration. I ask you to be fair when you talk about civil service employees and unions. I ask you to understand that benefits are gotten through a give-and-take process. Everyone wants to talk about the benefits we received, but no one seems to mention the millions of dollars we saved the county with contract concessions that we have made in the past.