

Westchester legislators pass budget with 2% tax cut, day-care funds restored

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WHITE PLAINS — Democratic lawmakers responded to County Executive Rob Astorino's **budget** proposal with a 2 percent tax-levy decrease — and Republicans are backing it, albeit with reservations.

The Westchester County Board of Legislators, by a 16-1 vote with Democratic Legislator Martin Rogowsky of Harrison voting against it, on Friday approved a \$1.79 billion budget for 2011 that slashes the work force by roughly 90 positions and restores funding for day care, **health centers**, mental health clinics, Labs and Research, Section 8 housing and nonprofits, just to name a few.

It reduces spending by \$28.5 million from this year and is the second-largest decrease in 35 years.

In the end, the budget balances the concerns of taxpayers, workers and those who need **services**, said Chairman Ken Jenkins, D-Yonkers, while providing an appropriate transition period for some programs.

"We understand that we have to do more with less," Jenkins said. "The biggest issue here is we're able to achieve the **savings**. We weren't capsizing; we were rightsizing."

This budget provides essential services, protects the so-called safety-net programs and won't raise **taxes**, the chairman said.

It also uses less from the **fund** balance — \$3.5 million instead of \$10 million as Democrats had proposed — after Republicans and business groups complained. Additionally, lawmakers won't borrow for tax settlements, or certioraris, as Astorino had proposed.

In addition to restoring money for programs, it

provides dollars to help with a six-month transition of four mental health centers located in Yonkers, Mount Vernon, Peekskill and Mount Kisco that eventually may be run by other providers.

In a relatively late development, legislators also chopped millions set aside for expected cost-of-living raises for unsettled contracts with correction, police and other unions, which was a concern for some lawmakers but not a deal-breaker.

Democrats defended that move by saying they are on board with Astorino's goal of keeping wage increases at bay.

In recent days, board Democrats added \$500,000 to their own budget, a transfer, for legal services — presumably to pay for lawyers given legal challenges between the branches — as well as millions for undesignated projects that Republicans characterized as earmarks.

The vote comes after more than a month of budget sessions, negotiations and public hearings throughout Westchester where taxpayers and affected groups turned out hundreds at a clip.

Though Republicans signed onto the document on grounds that it lowered taxes, cut spending and protected vital programs, they did so reluctantly and took issue with the process. They accused Democrats of doing too much business behind closed doors.

"I feel the budget was rushed. It was not fair to our caucus," said Minority Leader Jim Maisano, R-New Rochelle. "The budget process is not over today. We reserve the right to vote on vetoes on their merits."

Now the question is: Will Astorino reject parts or all of it?

Anticipating some push back, Jenkins moved up the vote from Monday so that Democrats could respond to any potential vetoes before the **holidays** and meet

the Dec. 27 deadline. They need 12 votes for an override.

The Astorino administration said it would look at the details.

"We're glad to see the Board of Legislators has followed the lead of the county executive to provide much-needed tax relief, but how you get to the tax increase is as important as the number," said Ned McCormack, Astorino's senior adviser and communications director. "We're going to take a close look at the numbers and see if these add up."

Legislator Tom Abinanti of Greenburgh, who voted on his last county budget because he is headed to the Assembly in January, said the product was right for the times.

"It's a good budget, in spite of the times. It will make county **government** work for the community," he said. "The Board of Legislators agree: County government in this time should be smaller, should spend less and should cost taxpayers less. This is even better than the county executive proposed."