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Westchester exec Astorino warns of layoffs, urges union givebacks

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Westchester County Executive Rob Astorino has sent another shot over the bow to unions and reiterated his jobs-for-savings mantra.

In a memo to county workers obtained by The Journal News this week, Astorino said layoffs were likely next year and he again called on unions for givebacks to save their county jobs.

"While we have been able to avoid layoffs this year, that likely will not be the case in 2011," Astorino said. "So to the heads of our unions, I am repeating my plea to work with me to preserve jobs in return for savings."

The memo, which was accompanied by a robo-call to workers, gave three scenarios to close the looming \$166 million budget gap:

- Concessions from unions and workers regarding pay and benefits.
- Leave union contracts as they are and make up the shortfall with hundreds of layoffs.
- A combination of concessions, layoffs, savings and program cuts.

Some union leaders say the message was tantamount to intimidation, while legislators say the county executive is treading a fine line by using county resources to challenge the unions.

"It is really something that is on the edge of appropriateness," said Board of Legislators Chairman Ken Jenkins, D-Yonkers. "If he didn't cross that line, it certainly was close. ... I don't believe it was an appropriate way to use county resources."

Jenkins characterized portions of the memo as a "scare tactic," part of a series of worst-case scenarios the Republican executive is tossing around to force unions to agree to concessions on raises, health care contributions and other benefits.

"It's a challenging time, absolutely, but the county board (revenue) projections have been conservative," Jenkins said, citing better-than-expected sales-tax revenues made public this week. "We hope the worst-case scenario is not going to be the

case."

The county's largest union, the Civil Service Employees Association, won't renegotiate its existing contract — the current six-year deal settled late in 2008 includes 3 percent to 4 percent raises — until it expires next year, said Karen Pecora, president of CSEA Unit 9200, which represents roughly 4,000 workers.

"How could I ever negotiate a contract? It would be worthless," she said. "We just can't do it."

Pecora said she expects that health care, wages and other benefits will be part of negotiations going forward and they'll be addressed at the bargaining table.

The memo was meant to keep workers informed of the county's challenges and similar to one sent when Astorino first took office, said Ned McCormack, Astorino's senior adviser and communications director. There was no intent to intimidate or threaten — it was simply communicating with employees, he said.

"The message is the same, it's jobs for savings," McCormack said. "We thought it was time for an update. ... Every dollar we save minimizes layoffs. We've got a \$166 million deficit. It won't go away by itself. The sooner we can attack it, the better off everyone will be."

The message also highlighted the \$16 million in savings already realized through department realignments and service cuts.

It provided an update on an expected \$7 million in savings from a county buyout affecting about 140 workers and millions more from the hundreds of workers expected to take advantage of a state incentive that will be finalized later this year.

For Pecora, the memo was a reminder that unions must do a better job of explaining to the public what their workers do and how they make county government run.

Despite some views to the contrary, CSEA members — secretaries, social workers, electricians and the like — aren't pulling in the six-figure salaries and aren't earning a lot of overtime, she said. On average, they make about \$50,000 a year, she said.

On the threat of layoffs, Pecora said: "Our question is, 'Who is going to do the work?'"