

Some staff in county to pay into health care

WHITE PLAINS — A three-month battle to get nonunion managers to pay a portion of their health care was approved, so some workers will have to start paying this year.

The Westchester County Board of Legislators on Monday passed a tiered contribution model that favors longer-serving workers and requires others to kick in from 5 percent to 15 percent. Affected workers will start paying July 1 and end Dec. 31.

"I think we agree that the time has come for employees to contribute," said Vice Chairman Lyndon Williams, D-Mount Vernon, who was an architect of this plan and advocate of a larger long-term health-plan overhaul that would save millions more. "However, there must be an orderly transition. ... An interim plan is an appropriate way to go."

Chairman Ken Jenkins, D-Yonkers, put the item on Monday night's special meeting agenda to move it forward since various incarnations have languished in committee since County Executive Rob Astorino in January first proposed a 15 percent across-the-board contribution for all nonunion managers.

Jenkins said it was important to have an "up-or-down vote on it" so that legislators could move on to broader reforms.

The board was to have scheduled a public hearing at its March 1 meeting, but it was tabled by Minority Leader James Maisano, R-New Rochelle. He said he didn't like the tiered approach because it cut out too many employees and set a bad precedent for future union negotiations. That could cost taxpayers millions of dollars since the goal is to eventually

have all workers contribute to health-care costs, he said.

This plan is "flawed and watered down," Maisano added. Rushing it without a public hearing deprives taxpayers from having a say, he said.

Some Democrats said it simply didn't deliver the needed savings.

"The plan doesn't require enough contributions," said Legislator John Nonna, D-Pleasantville, who supports a contribution plan that is closer to the county executive's.

The relatively modest savings in this tiered model — in the ballpark of \$300,000 — comes as county leaders are considering a broader health-plan overhaul they expect would save millions.

They are also considering much larger cuts proposed last week by Astorino to address a projected \$166 million shortfall next year with service cuts, job vacancies and possibly layoffs — eliminating as many as 1,600.

While Westchester remains one of four counties that do not require a contribution, the larger financial challenges, particularly looming pension obligations, aren't unique to the county. States and municipalities are dealing with plummeting revenues and escalating obligations.

During a visit to Westchester on Monday, Gov. David Paterson got a dose from people worried about state budget cuts, but he said there was no hidden purse to divvy up — cuts are inevitable, he said.

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The governor's message was similar to one delivered last week by Astorino, who earlier this year proposed that all nonunion workers contribute 15 percent of health premiums — now costing taxpayers between roughly \$7,000 and \$22,000 per worker — as one way to save.

The board's tiered approach, which is considered a compromise to Astorino's plan and a temporary measure, required nonunion managers to pay 5 percent to 15 percent of their health insurance premiums depending on how long they have worked for the county, while exempting workers with more than 20 years of service.

It also allowed elected officials to voluntarily contribute 15 percent.

It was similar to Astorino's approach in that it includes 416 workers in the Board of Legislators and its staff, the District Attorney's Office, Westchester Community College, the judiciary and all departments under the county executive.

The Astorino administration has maintained that across-the-board contributions would be fair to taxpayers and to employees. It has said the existing model would be unsustainable, given the county's financial challenges.

Health-care benefits now cost the county \$148.8 million, up from nearly \$68 million in 2000.

"We're all on board that everybody should contribute," said Legislator Peter Harckham, D-Katonah. "This is a bridge to a more holistic approach. It's not the perfect plan, but it gives us some time. The real savings is when we get into the nitty-gritty of the health-care plans."

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