

Astorino proposes alternative health- contribution plan

BY GERALD MCKINSTRY • GMCKINST@LOHUD.COM • MAY 1, 2010

Hoping to end an impasse, County Executive Rob Astorino on Friday proposed an alternative health contribution plan that exempts workers with 30 years on the job. In pitching his new model, the Republican wants to prevent a so-called "brain drain" from the District Attorney's Office and end a standstill over dueling plans between him and the Board of Legislators. "We think this is the right compromise for everyone," Astorino said. "This is the most equitable and yields the most savings. ... **I'm moving off from my original plan** because I think it's really important to get this passed."

The amended plan maintains Astorino's original 15 percent across-the-board contribution for nonunion managers, though **it exempts workers with more than 30 years of county service, or 35 people.** If approved, roughly 400 workers would be affected. It would save slightly less than the original plan's \$600,000 for six months, the administration said. The compromise addresses concerns raised by legislators and District Attorney Janet DiFiore, who feared that her experienced staff would leave public service under prior proposals. DiFiore, a Democrat, supports the compromise. The announcement came a day after the county executive and the county board reached an agreement to save the Manhattan Express Bus with higher fares and fewer runs.

It also came days after the board tabled four proposals — including another county board plan to have employees contribute to health-care costs; employee buyouts; and caps on sick and vacation pay. "We're really and truly trying," Astorino said of reaching a compromise with the board. "Everyone realizes there's a sense of urgency. We have to save money immediately. That's starting to happen." Since Astorino wants this plan to be a model for union negotiations, he doesn't like the board's tiered approach because it's more complicated and saves less money.

He proposed his original concept in January, but the county board came up with a 5-percent-15-percent tiered alternative favoring longer-serving workers, which he vetoed. The board then came back with another idea this week for nonunion employees whereby those earning the highest base pay would contribute as much as 25 percent of the cost of their health insurance.

Westchester is one of only four counties in the state that does not have its employees contribute to health premiums; it cost taxpayers \$149 million this year. Vice Chairman Lyndon Williams, D-Mount Vernon said he hasn't seen Astorino's latest proposal, but could support it if it was fair and achieved savings. "We are looking for a solution. We have to be open-minded," Williams said. "We have to look at all the proposals." Legislator John Testa of Peekskill called the proposal "an uncomplicated plan that yields long-term savings to taxpayers and addresses the district attorney's and legislators' concerns."

(Westchester County is self insured via a POMCO administered plan and pays no premiums except for approx 600 employees in HMO plans with Aetna, HIP, and Oxford. POMCO is paid over \$4 million yearly to administer the self insured plan)