

Astorino pushes; legislators press

Two weeks after taking office, Westchester County Executive Rob Astorino entered a ballroom filled with hundreds of business leaders at a Tarrytown Hotel.

The crowds gravitated toward the new county executive, some wished him well and others implored him to deliver on his campaign pledge to slice spending.

The highest-taxed county in the nation, after all, had a new Republican leader who was diametrically different than the 12-year Democratic incumbent he ousted in November.

That January morning, in his first major announcement, Astorino proposed that nonunion managers be treated more like their private-sector counterparts and kick in 15 percent to their health-care costs.

It was supposed to be a layup.

But it was blocked by the Democratically led Board of Legislators. The party holds a 12-4 majority.

Four months have passed since Astorino took office and the board's Democratic Chairman Ken Jenkins pledged an "epidemic of cooperation."

In between, there was an inauguration, a State of the County address and lots of talk about budgets and possible cuts — and far more debate on health contributions than anyone ever expected.

Astorino said he's still coming to grips with the

"enormity of the job" and his win, and promised to deliver on his pledge to shrink county government.

"People are looking to see that I do what I said I was going to do. So far, they're surprised I'm marching down that path," Astorino said during a nearly one-hour meeting last week with The Journal News in his ninth-floor office. "This has become an epicenter for the tax revolt, in many ways, and whether the suburbs are going to stay affordable or not and that's really the battle we're dealing with."

The battle has most often been waged with the Board of Legislators. Other than a recent agreement to temporarily salvage a Manhattan express bus and a "wish list" of state initiatives, the two branches haven't agreed on much — not even the size of the projected deficit.

Health care, day care, bus routes — name an issue and the two branches don't appear to be in sync with solutions.

The battle may have come to a head last week, when four items — another county board plan to have employees contribute to health-care costs, employee buyouts, and caps on sick and vacation pay — were tabled by legislators from both parties.

Astorino said he understood the "push-pull" between the branches, but it was important to take action.

"In order to move this boulder up the hill, they're going to have to be part of the process," Astorino said. "There's been enough talk, sometimes you have to move from the talking phase to the acting phase. ... Delaying the inevitable is in no one's interest."

"With the exception of the health-care plan that they

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completely changed in a way that I thought was unacceptable," he said, Democratic legislators have been "shouting 'no' as opposed to coming up with solutions."

Jenkins, a Yonkers Democrat, said the first months have shown that governing is far more complicated than campaigning. Differing political philosophies make it far more challenging, he said.

"It's absolutely growing pains," Jenkins said of the relationship. "The county executive has a prerogative on how he wants to deliver services. The members of the Board of Legislators have a different viewpoint. We have some different philosophical viewpoints."

Despite those disagreements, Jenkins said, the relationship is evolving.

"The last week has been an example of how far things have come," Jenkins said of a compromise to save a Manhattan express bus. "To be fair to them, they've been doing this for four months. ... We're still going to disagree on things, but there has not been a time when there's been a disrespectful dispute, it's been a strong disagreement."

Those differences may come at individual legislators' peril, since Astorino is doing what he said he would, said GOP political consultant Michael Edelman.

"If the board obstructs, they do so at their own risk," Edelman said. "He's articulating the message that voters sent during the election: They want spending reductions. They want employees to give something. The whole point is about fairness to the taxpayer. Everybody has to share the burden."

"The landscape is absolutely changing," he said.

Democrats also say the time has come for workers to contribute to health care, but the two sides can't agree on the details.

The board in March passed its own tiered version that favored longer serving workers, but Astorino vetoed it.

Members came back with another plan in April — one that Jenkins said was "veto-proof" — that calls

for the highest-earning nonunion workers to contribute as much as 25 percent, with others paying as little as 5 percent.

That was tabled last week by Republican lawmakers. Days later, Astorino came back with compromise that exempted workers with more than 30 years of county service. He said it was important to give some concessions while showing there was a sense of urgency.

Democrats are not obstructionists, party Chairman Reginald LaFayette said. They are simply fighting for the groups affected by the cuts, he said, particularly those who use buses and day care.

"I think they are fighting for the principles of the party — to take care of those who can't," LaFayette said. "They're doing what they should be doing to protect the middle and working class. The Democrats should be protecting the *quality of life* for the working and middle classes. People need services now more than ever."

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