

Astorino's Westchester budget plan lays off 226, cuts services, reduces taxes

WHITE PLAINS — In his first-ever budget proposal, Westchester County Executive Rob Astorino on Tuesday released a \$1.78 billion plan that cuts taxes by 1 percent and lays off 226 workers. In slicing \$33 million in spending, Astorino plans on closing two homeless shelters, two county pools, four mental health clinics and eliminating millions in subsidies for health care and childhood vaccinations as well as cutting millions to the Human Rights Commission, Cornell Cooperative Extension, Invest in Kids and other nonprofits that receive county aid. While his plan also increases golf fees by a few dollars and day care contributions by 13 percent, there will be no cuts to Bee-Line bus services — not yet, anyway. The goal, Astorino said, was to rid Westchester of its distinction of being the highest taxed county in the country. "I was elected on a platform of stopping the tax madness," he said during remarks at the county office building Tuesday. "We're attacking the problem head-on and making very difficult choices." Though the tax decrease would be small, Astorino said it was mostly about sending "a powerful message to the people of this county."

Since revenue isn't the county's main problem — spending is, he said — his administration is making tough choices over must-have services versus "nice-to-haves." "We have to reverse that," he said of chronic tax and program increases that have made it hard for businesses and families — young and old — to remain in Westchester. "This is the first step in a new direction and that's what this is all about." Since the average cost of a county worker is expected to reach \$117,000 in 2011 — including medical and pension benefits, Astorino said there was no way to avoid layoffs without increasing taxes.

The staff cuts he proposed are in addition to the 465 buyouts offered earlier this year and 14 other vacancies that won't be filled, he said. That translates into a 12 percent staff reduction, or 705 fewer county workers overall. "The cost of labor is far outpacing what we can afford," he said. "We have to get our labor costs under control."

Union leaders say the county executive's cost estimates are high since most members of Civil Service Employees Association Unit 9200 aren't making near that amount — even with fringe benefits.

The high salaries are commissioners, directors and members of Astorino's

immediate staff, they say. "We seem to be bearing the brunt" of cuts, said John Staino, president of CSEA Westchester Local 860, which represents about 14,000 members in municipalities and school districts throughout the region. "We're getting to the breaking point."

Both services and residents will be affected by this budget, union leaders said.

Astorino said his staff is down by 19 people, or 39 percent, since taking over from County Executive Andy Spano. That's roughly \$741,000 in **savings**, he said. By making the overall cuts, Astorino puts the onus, or perhaps even the pressure, on members of the Board of Legislators who can either restore spending, propose other changes or approve the budget — a combination is likely. In a meeting immediately following the budget announcement, legislators pledged an open, thorough and deliberative process that would protect those who need services while not raising property taxes.

"We need to tone down the ridiculous rhetoric that affects people's lives," said board Chairman Ken Jenkins, D-Yonkers. "We take this stuff extremely seriously. "The process is just beginning," he added. "The last part of the budget belongs to the board."

The board will begin its hearings with commissioners and department heads next week, hold a public hearing in December, and ratify a plan before the end of the year. Legislators warned that **investing** in day care, for example, often reaps longer-term savings in public services and education costs. They say they will analyze both the short-term and long-term effects on programs and services and take a broader view of government's role in the county.

Astorino, a Republican, said his budget provided relief to taxpayers, protected people in need, preserved essential programs and promoted the long-term health of the county. And it wasn't loaded with "gimmicks" or "one-shots," a reference to state and federal aid or overly optimistic revenue projections, he said. Citing Nassau County, which recently had its **credit rating** downgraded because of its budget challenges, Astorino called on members of the county board not to use that logic in restoring any of his proposed cuts. "I urge the board to take the right steps," he said. "That is simply putting a Band-Aid on a gaping wound." The **Business Council** of Westchester lauded Astorino's proposal. They agreed that reduced government spending was "the only way" to lower property taxes.

"This sends an important signal that Westchester is changing its culture and economic climate," said Christopher O'Callaghan, senior director at Cushman & Wakefield and chairman of the business council. "This will lead to positive **economic growth**."

Budget highlights

- A 12 percent workforce reduction, which includes 226 layoffs spread throughout departments and the 465 buyouts from this year. They are also eliminating 14 vacant positions. The total reduction amounts to 705 people, leaving the workforce at 4,996.
- Closing Sprain Ridge and Playland pools, which Astorino said are in need of extensive repairs.
- Closing four mental health clinics in Peekskill, Mount Kisco, Yonkers and Mount Vernon because of plunging state reimbursement rates that would more than double costs to \$3 million. Most other counties no longer provide such services, Astorino said.
- Closing two underutilized homeless shelters including WestHelp Family Shelter in Greenburgh and Oasis shelter in New Rochelle. WestHelp has a 55 percent vacancy rate while Oasis has a 64 percent vacancy rate. Those using these shelters still have access to the county's 10 remaining facilities, Astorino said.
- Raising parental contributions to the county's Title XX child care programs by 13 percent, which on average, translates to a \$6 increase to \$16 a day, the county executive said. The county would also cap slots at 385. There are 289 children in the program.
- Ending \$1.9 million in subsidies to three neighborhood health centers including Mount Vernon Neighborhood Health Center, that pays for HIV and other sexually transmitted disease testing, tuberculosis treatment and childhood vaccinations. Astorino said federal healthcare reform would give these facilities a new stream of revenue.
- Cutting staff, costs and streamlining the Human Rights Commission, which is expected to save \$559,000.
- Cutting \$1.3 million from Cornell Cooperative Extension; \$665,000 from Arts of Westchester; \$634,000 from Invest in Kids and \$171,000 from the Hudson River Museum.
- Cutting \$100,000 in subsidies for groups sponsoring ethnic festivals.
- Increasing golf green fees by \$1 and gold cart rentals by \$1 to \$18.

Source: County Executive



Westchester County Executive Rob Astorino outlines his proposed 2011 county budget during a news conference at the county office building in White Plains on Tuesday. (Matthew Brown/The Journal News)