

Rob Astorino defends Westchester budget plan; with video highlights

Cutting programs and services is about shrinking government and changing Westchester's distinction as the highest taxed county in the country, County Executive Rob Astorino said yesterday.

"We are at a point where we are way too big," Astorino said Tuesday before The Journal News and LoHud.com Editorial Board.

During the segment, which lasted more than an hour, the county executive explained his rationale behind a \$1.78 billion budget proposal that trimmed spending by \$33 million and closed homeless shelters, pools and mental-health clinics and cut millions more for area not-for-profits and service providers.

Astorino said his administration made tough but necessary choices because county government faces many structural problems that aren't going away.

Overall, he said his decisions were fair while still protecting those most in need.

Some of the problems facing county government include an expensive work force that could eventually bankrupt taxpayers, providing unnecessary or redundant services that could be done by the private sector, and the decline in revenues and state and federal aid, he said.

Also appearing with Astorino were Budget Director Larry Soule and Grant Mitchell, commissioner of mental health and acting commissioner of the Department of Social Services.

Their appearance came a week after Astorino unveiled his budget and at the beginning of the budget season. The final version must be approved by next month.

Legislators, unions, child care advocates and other providers have said they're going to try to get some of these decisions reversed.

Union leaders, particularly from Civil Service Employees Association Unit 9200, said they are bearing the brunt of Astorino's cuts and take issue with his assertion that they will cost taxpayers

\$117,000 a worker when salary and benefits are accounted.

Members of the county board, including Chairman Ken Jenkins, D-Yonkers, have said they won't raise taxes but will make changes to Astorino's plan, including laying fewer people off.

The Democratic majority will respond at 1 p.m. Nov. 23, when several members will appear before the Editorial Board, said Tara Martin, communications director for the board.

Some of the focus of yesterday's spotlight was on changes to foster care, day care, mental health and other service cuts.

At one point, a viewer wanted to know if all these changes would affect the public and whether they were worth the relatively nominal savings on a tax bill that represents roughly 20 percent of the total bill.

"That's why we're the highest taxed county," Astorino said. "It's that mentality — it's just \$40, it's just \$100. That's why we're here.

"I don't see that as a badge of honor," Astorino said of being the highest taxed county in the United States. "We're going to turn this ship around."

Although Astorino's acknowledged his plan to cut the tax levy by 1 percent is modest, the mostly "symbolic" move is about making Westchester more friendly to families, senior citizens, taxpayers and businesses.

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"I think the 1 percent decrease is important. It's set a tone; it was a very strong signal that said, 'We get it,' " Astorino said. "It really sets a new tone. It says to the people of this county, 'We understand that we are the highest taxed county in America.' "



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