



November 18, 2010

## Residents assail Astorino's budget plan

*Gerald McKinstry*  
*gmckinst@lohud.com*

YONKERS — Though Frances Alari doesn't use any of the services slated to be sliced from Westchester County's budget, she knows they are vital.

Her sister, who lost her job more than a year ago, is dealing with depression with the help of mental health programs that are subsidized by the county. Losing that help would be devastating, she said.

"She's ill and needs these programs," said Alari, 33, from Yonkers. "She's going through a rough time. She's scared and not going to have anywhere to go. I'm here to support these programs."

Alari was among hundreds of people and concerned groups that turned up Wednesday night for a public hearing on County Executive Rob Astorino's \$1.78 billion budget proposal at the Yonkers Riverfront Library.

And most weren't all too pleased with Astorino's proposed cuts.

It was the first of three public hearings before the Board of Legislators approves a plan, likely with modifications, scheduled for Dec.13.

Holding signs such as "Restore Funding" and "Save our Safety Net: Stop Cutting Our Services," a standing-room crowd shared all sorts of stories on how they are assisted, and would be potentially harmed, by the county executive's budget.

Standing in the back of the room with her 2-year-old son, Amanda Costillo feared losing her job as a teacher at a Yonkers day-care center.

"If they are going to cut child care, that leaves me without a job and going backwards," the 38-year-old Yonkers woman said. "Pay (isn't) any higher and rents aren't lower."

After talking about the county's fiscal problems since taking office earlier this year, Astorino last week unveiled his first budget with serious cuts to programs and services as well as 226 layoffs.

While it included a 1 percent tax levy cut, which Astorino acknowledged is mostly symbolic, his budget called for the closing of four mental health facilities in Peekskill, Mount Kisco, Yonkers and Mount Vernon, two homeless shelters — WestHelp Family Shelter in Greenburgh and Oasis in New Rochelle — and the Sprain Ridge and Playland pools.

It also had millions in reductions to the Human Rights Commission, Cornell Cooperative Extension, Arts of Westchester and many other nonprofit groups that provide all sorts of services.

While roughly \$6 million was added to the Department of Social Services budget, golf fees went up by \$1 a round and day-care contributions increased by \$6 a day.

In all, it was \$33 million less than the current budget.

In defending his plan, the county executive said his goal is to shrink the size of government and rid the county of programs it shouldn't be doing. He says he trying to rid Westchester of its first-place ranking of highest taxed counties in the United States.

That logic resonated with Gary Murphy, who was among the few in the room to support the Republican executive.

"Our county is in fiscal crisis," said Murphy, a 40-year-old small-business owner from Chappaqua who is considering leaving the area because of its high taxes and anti-business environment. "I live within a budget. I want the county to do the same."

"I made these cuts two and three years ago," he said, citing the high local property taxes and the MTA payroll tax. "It seems government goes to those who show up."

Astorino has also been critical of unions, particularly the county's largest, Civil Service Employees Association Unit 9200, for not taking pay cuts or contributing to their health care plans. Most of the layoffs are directed at its members and spread out through the Health Department, Housing, Public Works, Labs and Research and Information Technology.

CSEA members, donning blue T-shirts, were out in force and challenged Astorino and his vision.

Many people said the 1 percent savings is hardly worth unraveling vital safety net programs.

Rona Shapiro, 57, said eliminating these programs is short-sighted and would cost more in the long run.

"I think basically it's a formula for raising taxes, not lowering taxes," she said. "I believe this budget weakens the economy and is harmful to those in need."

## Additional Facts

### Upcoming public hearings

- 7 p.m., Nov. 23, Northern County Regional Public Hearing — Pleasantville High School, 60 Romer Ave., Pleasantville
- 7 p.m., Dec. 9, Regional Public Hearing — White Plains, Board of Legislators' Board Chambers, 8th floor, Michaelian Office Building, 148 Martine Ave.