

## Westchester Democrats aim for less painful budget without tax increase

The Democratic majority of the Westchester County Board of Legislators is now immersed in the slow, exacting and painfully difficult process of trying to fashion a response to County Executive Rob Astorino's cost-cutting **budget** proposal.

The Democrats want to restore certain proposed cuts to **social services** while not delivering bigger bills to taxpayers.

"We'd like to come in with no tax increase, yet we're very mindful of the needs of the neediest out there," said Majority **Leader** Peter Harckham, D-Katonah.

Astorino's proposed \$1.78 billion budget, released last week, would eliminate \$33 million in spending, partly by cutting 226 **jobs**. As it stands, the plan would add up to a 1 percent cut in the tax levy.

The spending plan would close mental **health** clinics in Peekskill, Mount Kisco, Yonkers and Mount Vernon, close homeless shelters

in Greenburgh and New Rochelle, and end \$1.9 million in subsidies to three neighborhood health centers.

Astorino would also raise parental **contributions** to the county's Title XX child-care program. Families would have to pay, on average \$16 a day, a \$6 increase.

In a conference call with reporters yesterday, Democratic legislators said they are now meeting with department heads, poring over budget lines and searching for **savings** and revenues Astorino might have missed.

They said they would have specifics next week. The board is scheduled to approve a budget on Dec. 13.

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The Democrats said they didn't know how much of Astorino's \$33 million in cuts they might restore. The bottom line, they said, is producing the best budget they can without a tax increase.

"We've all heard the hue and cry to bring taxes down, streamline government, streamline services," said Majority Whip Judith Myers, D-Larchmont. "Where can we find savings without balancing the budget on the backs of those who can least afford it?"

Democrats said they are leaning toward merging the departments of transportation and public works, a move that would save \$225,000 in **salaries** and benefits for one commissioner alone.

They said they're looking at a proposed merger of the departments of public safety and emergency services.

"We're concerned about potential impacts to public safety," Harkham said.

Even cuts to a little-known department like labs and research, they said, could have

serious ramifications.

"There could be a sizable delay, according to the commissioner, in the time it takes for evidence to be processed," Harkham said.

They also said the Department of Parks and Recreation is cutting spending and looking to increase fees, the offices for senior programs and women are "belt tightening," and the Health Department is trying to figure out how it will be affected by federal **health care** reform.

The legislators are also studying how certain cuts may result in lost revenues. A \$1.3 million cut to Cornell Cooperative Extension would make it harder for the educational program to get other

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grants, they said.

By cutting 226 jobs across departments, Astorino is continuing to hack away at the workforce. Fourteen other vacancies that won't be filled, 465 buyouts offered earlier this year and the new cuts would shrink the workforce by 705 people or 12 percent.

Hundreds came to a public hearing on the budget Wednesday in Yonkers, with the great majority lamenting how the proposed cuts would affect services to the needy.

The next few weeks promise to be a grind for all involved. As board Chairman Ken Jenkins, D-Yonkers, put it: "Someone walked up to me yesterday and said 'Everyone wants to eat ice cream all the time, but no one wants to get fat.' "

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