

Westchester Democrats doubt savings in Section 8 housing-voucher shift

By Gerald McKinstry • gmckinst@lohud.com • November 5, 2010

LoHud

WHITE PLAINS — Democrats were on the offensive Thursday, charging that **County Executive Rob Astorino's** administration is callously cutting a housing contract and 40 jobs under the pretense that it's losing money.

That's a notion Republican leaders reject. "This is complete mismanagement by this administration," said **Board Chairman Ken Jenkins**, D-Yonkers. "That program pays for itself. Over the past 5 years, this program has paid for itself each and every year."

Astorino announced last week that his administration won't run the state's Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher Program for low-income people because the county loses more than \$500,000 on an \$86 million program that pays the county \$4 million for administrative costs.

In doing so, Astorino called it an "unnecessary expense" that doesn't cover itself or longer-term costs like [health](#) care and pensions estimated at \$700,000 a year. The contract to administer roughly 4,400 of Westchester's 11,000 housing vouchers that are paid to landlords expires on Dec. 31. The county has run it since 1975.

In a committee meeting with dozens of people — including many of the affected workers — legislators grilled members of the administration on how they calculated the losses. It was at times contentious and combative.

Chief of Staff George Oros said neither the federal nor state government "picks up legacy costs" for pensions and health care. "This costs the taxpayers money. It's not a dollar-for-dollar reimbursement," he said. "The notion that somehow we are made whole is a fallacy."

Farming this program out to nonprofits or the private sector would save millions over 10 or 15 years, Oros said. "The county is not abandoning section 8. ... Vouchers will still be available," Oros said. "This is simply a change in the way a program or [service](#) is delivered." It's both a [financial](#) and philosophical decision to "downsize county government," he said.

During the meeting, members of the administration said while this program hasn't directly lost money in the past, benefits and an expected spike in technology costs, which are expected to go from \$37,500 this year to \$321,583 in 2011, make it a losing proposition.

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"Our concern is not only the jobs, but the [services](#)," said **Karen Pecora**, president of **Civil Service Employees Association Unit 9200**, or CSEA.

She said "there's no not-for-profit in the world" that can run the program like county staff, adding that it's impossible for the county executive to know what future benefit costs will be, since their contract, which expires next year, hasn't been negotiated.

The Section 8 program is a federal program through the Department of Housing and Urban Development that is administered by states and municipalities. Westchester is one of five counties in the state that runs such a program. There are 13 communities in the county that operate their own programs, including Yonkers, Greenburgh, Eastchester and Peekskill.

Legislator John Nonna, D-Pleasantville, said he wasn't "convinced yet" that more savings couldn't be found or that the state wouldn't increase its contribution, since they haven't yet been asked.

"We're supposed to get it covered. Why can't we get it covered?" Nonna said. "What's disturbing is the administration put forth this without all the answers."