

## Astorino cancels Section 8 housing contract, killing 40 jobs

In what may be a preview of things to come in the next few weeks, County Executive Rob Astorino is cutting some ties with the state — along with 40 county jobs.

Astorino announced Thursday that Westchester County won't administer the state's Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher Program for low-income people because the county loses too much money on the \$4.5 million contract: \$500,000 plus long-term pension and health care costs.

Astorino called it an "unnecessary expense." "The county's contract with the state is just not economically viable," Astorino said in a statement. "Sadly, this is just a tough decision that has to be made to bring down costs to affordable levels."

Critics on the Board of Legislators were caught off guard by the announcement. Board Chairman Ken Jenkins, D-Yonkers, said the county executive has again overstepped his authority in making a decision without consulting legislators. "Not only am I surprised and shocked, I'm totally disappointed in the process," Jenkins said. The county's contract expires Dec. 31.

Families receiving such assistance are not expected to be affected, as the aim is to shift responsibilities back to the state or onto nonprofits, Astorino said. The county administers 4,400 of Westchester's roughly 11,000 housing vouchers, which can be applied to rent. The county has run the program since 1975.

Under the program, which helps low-income, elderly and disabled people, recipients pay a percentage of their income to rent, typically no more than 30 percent, and the rest is subsidized by the government. Landlords are paid directly.

The announcement came on the same day Gov. David Paterson said he was laying off 898 state workers and reducing the state work force by 2,000 to save \$250 million. It also comes weeks before Astorino is expected to release his 2011 budget proposal, which will likely include significant program cuts and layoffs to fill a projected \$166 million budget gap.

The board has sued Astorino over his authority to make cuts to day-care programs. That case is in the courts.

"It's not a done deal," Jenkins said of the Section 8 cuts. "The Board of Legislators sets the policy, and we will exercise that right." The move raises many questions, and to date, there are few answers, Jenkins said. He added that lawmakers would take it up next week. The Section 8 program is a federal program through the Department of Housing and Urban Development that is administered through the states and municipalities. In Westchester, 13 communities administer their own programs, including Yonkers, Greenburgh, Eastchester and Peekskill.

A family of four, for example, can't earn more than \$52,650 to qualify for the program. A single person can't earn more than \$36,850.

Most of the workers who would be laid off are members of the county's largest union, Civil Service Employees Association Unit 9200, which represents about 3,700 people.

The move was a surprise to workers and union leaders who are trying to figure out what this means to workers and voucher recipients, said Karen Pecora, president of CSEA Unit 9200. "There are a million and eight questions," she said. "We don't really have all the answers."

Though the contract cancellation directly affects 40 workers who administer the program, Civil Service rules mean other employees will be affected, as those with seniority may be eligible for other jobs, pushing the layoffs on other employees.

Because the contract expires in 60 days, the Republican executive said, the state can work with other nonprofits that may provide services more cost-effectively.

"This is the model that should be used in Westchester," Astorino said.