

## Westchester budget OK'd; no tax hike; 187 jobs, health, nature centers saved

WHITE PLAINS – After a marathon of negotiations and back-and-forth, the Westchester County Board of Legislators early today approved a \$1.69 billion budget for next year that doesn't raise property taxes.

The final figures restored 187 jobs and protected programs like six nature centers, day care and health centers that were slated to be cut under County Executive Rob Astorino's proposal.

A deal was finally struck after hours of horse-trading – a few programs here, some jobs there and capital projects there – and finally came early this morning, 15 hours after the budget meeting began on Thursday.

Negotiations broke down several times throughout the day, but in the end, legislators approved a \$548.4 million tax levy. As the meeting approached its end at nearly 2 a.m., lawmakers

were brief in their comments.

"It was a long process, it always is," said Majority Leader Peter Harckham, D-Katonah. "This is the culmination of many 18-hour days."

The vote was 16 to 1, with Legislator Marty Rogowsky voting against the plan.

Rogowsky, a Democrat from Harrison who didn't seek re-election after 13 years on the board, praised Astorino and legislators for not using fund balance, but he wouldn't support borrowing millions for pensions.

"It's bad fiscal policy and I can't subscribe to it," said Rogowsky, who voted against the budget last year on similar grounds. "We should pay the bill now."

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Despite adding \$23 million back to Astorino's cuts, 23 jobs were still eliminated, which prompted Legislator Jose Alvarado, D-Yonkers, to call it a "painful budget."

"We couldn't save everybody in these economic times," he said, adding that the end product was a compromise.

Funds for Cornell Cooperative, ArtsWestchester, Invest-in-Kids, Legal Aid and probation were restored and offset with savings and revenues elsewhere, notably from the Department of Social Services and health care expenses.

Though the two branches agreed on a dollar amount and not raising taxes, they were split on jobs, capital projects and funding for non-profits: In the end, the board restored many jobs that Astorino wanted. In return, lawmakers wanted assurances that the county executive wouldn't veto some capital projects or programs like eviction prevention, food banks and homeless prevention.

The two branches have scheduled a joint press conference for 11 a.m. today.

Minority Leader James Maisano, R-New Rochelle, called it a bipartisan effort

that was a "high and professional level."

Earlier in the day, Chairman Ken Jenkins, D-Yonkers, called it a "heroic budget" that included bipartisan efforts and it didn't include using fund balance. A lot of dollars were identified in the Department of Social Services, which under-spent its allocations, and with monies budgeted, but not spent on county's health care program. That added up to millions, Jenkins and Harckham said,

"We stayed within the lines of the budget," Jenkins said.

The Democrats came in at \$1.69 billion, which is the same amount as Astorino proposed.

Astorino's proposal, which was released on Nov. 15, cut \$100 million

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in spending and eliminated 357 jobs, including 210 through layoffs. It did away with subsidies for cultural events, concerts and community activities like Bike Sundays along the Bronx River Parkway and Fireworks at Kensico Dam Plaza.

Though he didn't propose closing six nature centers, Astorino would have dropped staffing at them with a goal of maintaining them as passive parks. He also would have cut funding for nonprofits — \$990,000 for Cornell Cooperative Extension, \$750,000 for ArtsWestchester and \$443,223 for Legal Services of the Hudson Valley, among others.

Astorino's plan also would have raised fees for day care by 35 percent, from \$6 to \$16 a day, but Democrats wanted the fees at 20 percent.

Last year, the board lowered taxes by 2.2 percent.

County taxes make up roughly 20 percent of a property owners total tab with school making the lion's share at 65 percent.

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