

# Article on county's 'political payoffs' misleading

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Written by **Robert P. Astorino**

Re "Political Ties Pay Off — Amid fiscal crunch, county dishes out raises, promotions," May 22 article:

The above-referenced article, coupled with unflattering photographs, was a perfect example of how headlines and facts sometimes don't match. If you read the blaring headline proclaiming indiscriminate raises being doled out as political favors, you probably got angry. How could we allow this to happen? The fact is it's not true.

The fundamental flaw in both the headline and story was the failure to fully explain the difference between raises and promotions and patronage. Patronage is creating a job for someone who may not even be qualified, simply to get them on the public payroll. I have not and will not do that. The so-called political "raises" in the report were not raises at all. A raise is an increase in compensation one receives while remaining in the same position. These were appointments or promotions to different positions with set salaries.

Furthermore, the "raises" were misleadingly calculated. For example, George Oros went from a \$49,200 part-time job as a county legislator to a \$155,245 full-time job as my chief of staff.

The part-time pay was for Oros' service on the Board of Legislators, a position he was elected to seven times and held while running a successful law practice. Upon joining my administration, Oros gave up his law practice. This context — missing from the article — would have shown your readers that Westchester's "most lucrative" promotion was based on a meaningless apples-to-oranges comparison.

In the case of Philippe Gille, the article talks about how his salary increased by \$62,700 when he went from a voting machine technician in the Board of Elections to deputy commissioner of social services. The public should also know that Gille, who has a master's degree in accounting, had been chief of staff and acting commissioner of social services to former County Executive Andrew O'Rourke. He left government service four years ago to care full time for his ailing mother. When he returned to the workforce, the recession was in full swing and Gille took the best job available to him at the time, which was with the Board of Elections.

Furthermore, the Board of Elections is distinctly separate from my administrative appointments. By state law there are two deputy commissioners, one Republican and one Democratic, both of whom must receive identical salaries. The Republican deputy is chosen and appointed by the Republican commissioner and serves at his pleasure. The statement that the deputy received a \$51,000 raise is also inaccurate. She was promoted to the vacancy in that position after working at the board for five years in two previous positions and the article went back to her original salary in 2006 to make your calculation.

In any new administration, people are brought in to carry out new policies. This turnover is healthy. It is how government remains energized, dynamic and adaptive to change.

If I am to make the reforms that I have promised, I must select people to fill essential positions that I can trust. The people I have in my administration — and this includes some members of the previous administration — are here because they are qualified and committed to my agenda of lowering taxes, providing essential services, and promoting economic development to create jobs.

At the same time, I have streamlined the County Executive's Office by almost 25 percent, reducing the number of positions from 75 in 2009 to 57 in 2010. Also noteworthy is that management was not given a raise this year and, for the first time ever, is paying between 10 percent and 20 percent of health-care premiums. Obscene payouts for sick and vacation time have been slashed. Under my administration, the work force was reduced by 588 positions, or about 10 percent. We held the line on promotions in 2010 at 220, which is one less than my predecessor, Andy Spano, did in 2009, and far fewer than in 2006 (410), 2007 (400) or 2008 (329).

Union workers, through their six-year contract negotiated by the Spano administration and adopted by the Board of Legislators, have received an 8 percent raise over the last two years, plus automatic step and longevity pay increases, and continue to receive free health care, courtesy of the taxpayers. Add pension costs and other benefits, and the average cost of a county employee is \$117,000. The cost of labor is quickly exceeding our ability to pay for essential services. None of this is in the article.

To paraphrase the line from the movie "Casablanca," The Journal News appears to be shocked to find out that political people are in government. That's a shame. I am proud to say politics is an honorable profession. Cynical as we have all become, what parent still doesn't want their son or daughter to grow up to be president? Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, Kennedy and Reagan were all politicians.

Operationally, politics is central to the way government is run in the United States. We have political appointees who serve at the pleasure of elected officials. If the people are not happy with the way their government is being run, they can vote out the elected officials, and by extension, their appointees who manage operations.

County government is still too big and too expensive. I will continue to streamline our operations and cut wasteful programs, despite loud opposition from special interests who oppose necessary change at every turn.

**The writer, a Republican, is Westchester County executive.**