

Political ties pay off: Westchester doles out big raises amid fiscal crunch

Written by

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Westchester County shelled out millions in raises and promotions last year, with some politically connected workers getting the biggest bumps — by as much as \$62,700 in one case, and \$51,230 in another.

The bonanza occurred during County Executive's Rob Astorino's first year in office while he was sounding the alarm on daunting deficits and bloated payrolls and shrinking the workforce through layoffs and buy-outs.

The information was obtained through New York's **Freedom** of Information law and is part of The Journal News' ongoing review of county spending.

The newspaper reviewed thousands of payroll records from 2009 and 2010 and found that employees with the heftiest salary increases had strong political ties. The analysis did not include new hires, information from 2011, nor reflect contractually negotiated raises, which cover the lion's share of workers.

Some of the promotions included retroactive raises and prompted criticism from those who believe the Republican county executive is unfairly targeting them, and not others in his quest to shrink government and freeze pay.

"It's a little hypocritical," said Karen Pecora, president of the Civil Service Employees Association, the county's largest union that has been a focus of Astorino's tough talk on pay, layoffs and having workers contribute to their health care costs. "Little by little, he's starting to fill those offices again and not with little salaries."

The actions weren't confined to the county executive's staff.

The promotions were spread throughout different offices, including the Board of Legislators — authorized by its chairman, Democrat Ken Jenkins — and the Board of Elections and its two commissioners, Doug Colety, a Republican, and Reginald LaFayette, a Democrat.

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Both Colety and LaFayette are party bosses.

While the buyouts and retirement incentives created many openings, the respective directors defended their choices and said the pay was in line with the posts and not part of any patronage mill; it contributes to having a dynamic and dedicated workforce, they said.

One of the largest jumps was for Philippe Gille, a voting machine technician with the Board of Elections who was promoted to deputy commissioner of social services, where he manages budgets, contracts and other functions.

With that climb, the former county legislator candidate, aide under Republican County Executive Andrew O'Rourke, GOP Yonkers Mayor John Spencer and the Yonkers City Council, got a \$62,700 raise, bringing his salary to \$127,125.

The administration maintains that Gille, a Republican, is "eminently qualified."

"He's back where he was 12 years ago," said Ned McCormack, a senior adviser to Astorino and communications director, citing Gille's long tenure with the O'Rourke administration and other levels of government. "He's a longtime government worker."

Over at the Board of Elections, Nancy Meehan, wife of County Attorney Robert Meehan and chairwoman of the Mount Pleasant Republican Party, went from a program specialist to Republican deputy

commissioner, bumping her pay by \$51,230 to \$118,965.

"It's not what it looks like. ... Her last name has nothing to do with it," said Colety, the county's GOP chairman. "A lot of people from the county took the buyout and we have to fill those jobs."

"She has the skill set and expertise to do the job," added Colety, who himself was promoted to Republican elections commissioner in 2010 after Carolee Sunderland took a buyout.

With that, Colety received a \$36,280 raise to reach \$155,245.

"It comes with a lot of responsibility and no overtime whatsoever."

Both Colety and LaFayette said the Westchester Board of Elections, which must employ the same number of Democrats and Republicans, is operating with far fewer workers than its counterparts in Nassau or Suffolk counties.

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Those who have been politically active are often the ones who have the experience to execute responsibilities like running elections, he said.

"There's very few people who come in here and started at a high level," Colety said. "People were all promoted from within and the new people come in at a much lower level."

Though commissioners have a certain amount of control over hiring and promotions, they both said that the county sets the pay — not them. "I can't adjust the pay scale," Colety said.

The Astorino administration defended the promotions as a natural progression, saying the county workforce of 5,701 was cut by 588 in 2010.

There were 220 promotions, one shy of the 2009 figure, but far fewer than in 2006 (410), 2007 (400) or 2008 (329) when Andy Spano was county executive, McCormack said.

Last year, 132 workers took a county buyout and another 354 opted for the state incentive; another 102 workers were laid off, he said.

Some of these jobs had to be filled at the rate paid the previous worker — and 49 positions were added back, said McCormack, who had his pay increased by \$18,000 a few months after starting the job. The increase was part of an agreement with Astorino that he would earn the same pay that his predecessor did:

\$155,245.

"We've done a good job streamlining the size of government and we've been able to minimize the numbers we've brought back," he said. "We're happy where the numbers have come out.

For his part, county board Chairman Jenkins in 2010 authorized nearly \$75,000 in retroactive raises for his chief of staff, finance director, director of communications, board clerk and several aides.

All were part of a change in job functions, Jenkins said.

The largest was for board clerk Tina Seckerson, a board staffer since 1979 who was given \$20,338 more as part of an expansion of her job responsibilities, bringing her salary to \$135,000.

"We didn't give across-the-board raises," Jenkins said.

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"To put people in jobs and pay them is something I believe in."

WESTCHESTER GOVERNMENT'S MOST LUCRATIVE PROMOTIONS

These county employees received promotions that resulted in raises of \$10,000 or more between 2009 and 2010. They were all promoted to or from one of three departments: the Board of Elections, the Board of Legislators and the County Executive's Office.

Name	Percent change	2009 salary	2010 salary	Promotion
George Oros	216%	\$16,005	\$155,245	County legislator to chief of staff to the county executive
Philippe Gile	97%	\$42,390	\$127,321	Voting machine technician at the Board of Elections to deputy commissioner of social services
Nancy Meenan	79%	\$51,230	\$118,963	Program specialist to deputy commissioner at the Board of Elections
Vito Florio	88%	\$43,270	\$121,470	County legislator to coordinator of veterans affairs and Office of Drug Prevention
Douglas Currey	80%	\$16,280	\$115,245	Deputy commissioner to commissioner for the Board of Elections
Elizabeth Corino	52%	\$24,185	\$75,445	Office assistant to executive secretary at the Board of Elections
Dorothy Dipalo	52%	\$21,935	\$89,450	Executive secretary to program administrator at the Board of Elections
Tina Sekerson	18%	\$20,138	\$123,000	Acting clerk to clerk and chief administrative officer of the Board of Legislators
Jeanne Sord	40%	\$26,000	\$70,000	Legislative aide to committee coordinator at the Board of Legislators
Erica Starling	32%	\$12,240	\$75,465	Senior clerk to program specialist at the Board of Elections
Tara Martin	25%	\$13,300	\$85,000	Legislative aide and press secretary to director of communications at the Board of Legislators
Patti Yuan	34%	\$16,895	\$87,270	Accountant I to accountant III in the county executive's office
Katherine Delgado	34%	\$16,295	\$83,545	Legislative aide at the Board of Legislators to administrative aide for the county executive
Giuliana Marmigliacomo	42%	\$15,710	\$12,395	Immediate file clerk to clerk at the Board of Elections
Jeanne Pasquale Fichot	24%	\$14,550	\$72,345	Administrative aide to assistant to the county executive
Edward Zivada	25%	\$34,480	\$70,485	Junior administrative assistant to program specialist at the Board of Elections
Raymond Scully	26%	\$14,480	\$70,485	Senior clerk to voting machine technician at the Board of Legislators
Diana Walker	30%	\$14,293	\$61,793	Personal legislative aide to central staff aide at the Board of Legislators
Barbara Tublato	26%	\$13,795	\$87,000	Senior clerk at the Board of Elections to administrative aide to the county executive
Malika Vandenberg	18%	\$12,425	\$80,133	Committee coordinator to deputy clerk at the Board of Legislators
Martin Connolly	16%	\$12,350	\$89,630	Senior buyer in Finance to program administrator in the Board of Elections
Thomas Piconopoli	14%	\$12,225	\$18,455	Accountant III for the county executive to supervisor of fiscal operations for the Mental Health Department
Owen Falco	13%	\$11,800	\$123,005	Assistant II to assistant III for the county executive
Denise Cabbio	19%	\$10,540	\$83,000	Intern in the budget department to fiscal analyst with the Board of Legislators
Wendy Wild	20%	\$10,800	\$80,000	Personal aide to committee coordinator with Board of Legislators
Diane Rhode	21%	\$10,000	\$58,000	Personal aide to central staff aide for Board of Legislators
Olivia Rhode	8%	\$10,000	\$140,000	Deputy director to director of fiscal affairs for Board of Legislators

Source: Westchester County. Data compiled by the researcher.



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Westchester government's most lucrative promotions. Click Zoom to enlarge.

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George Oros went from his \$49,200 part-time job as a county legislator to full-time employment in the Astorino administration. Oros now makes \$155,245 as the Westchester County executive's chief of staff.

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Doug Colety received a \$36,280 raise to reach \$155,245 after he was promoted from deputy to Republican elections commissioner in 2010.



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Tara Martin saw her salary climb by \$17,000 to

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\$85,000 after she went from press secretary to director of communications for the Board of Legislators.

Some Westchester County employees are in the money

Here's a look at some of the promotions and job changes:

- **Philippe Gille**, a voting machine technician with the Board of [Elections](#), was promoted to deputy commissioner of social services. The former county legislator candidate and aide under County Executive **Andrew O'Rourke** and Yonkers Mayor **John Spencer**, saw his pay rise by \$62,700, bringing his salary to \$127,125.
- **Nancy Meehan**, wife of County Attorney **Robert Meehan**, went from a program specialist to [Republican](#) deputy elections commissioner, bumping her pay by \$51,230 to \$118,965.
- Two legislators gave up their \$49,200 part-time jobs for full-time gigs with the Astorino administration. **George Oros**, a Peekskill Republican, became Astorino's chief of staff, making \$155,245, while **Vito Pinto**, an Eastchester Democrat, became the head of veterans affairs and the Office of drug Prevention and Stop DWI, earning \$92,470. (The administration says Pinto is doing what has historically been two jobs.)
- **Dorothy Dipalo**, a Republican, went from secretary to program specialist, earning \$21,935 more, which brought her salary to \$89,670.
- **Howard Spreckman**, son of Republican Legislator **Bernice Spreckman**, saw his pay go up \$9,300 after he was promoted to assistant to the county executive.
- **Elizabeth Cerino**, sister of Astorino's confidential secretary, **John Cerino** (also a member of the Westchester County Republican Party), received a \$24,185 increase, to \$70,445 in her position with the Board of Elections.
- **Doug Colety** was promoted from deputy to Republican elections commissioner in 2010 after **Carolee Sunderland** took a buyout. With that, Colety received a \$36,280 raise to reach \$155,245.
- **Tina Seckerson** was given \$20,338 more as part of an expansion of her job responsibilities, which brought her salary to \$135,000.
- In going from press secretary to director of communications for the Board of Legislators, **Tara Martin** saw her salary climb by \$17,000 to \$85,000.
- **Maliika Vanderberg** was promoted from committee coordinator with the Board of Legislators to deputy clerk, and received an increase of \$12,425, to

\$80,333.

- Members of CSEA, which make up about 64 percent of the county's workforce received 4 percent raises as part of their negotiated contracts.

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