

Unions reject Westchester business group's offer to mediate contract talks

WHITE PLAINS — A business group's offer to mediate contract negotiations with Westchester County's unions was rejected on the spot Tuesday.

With a hope of saving 210 jobs and other potential budget casualties, the Westchester County Association on Tuesday called for "around-the-clock" contract talks and offered to mediate negotiations since they have reached a stalemate.

But it didn't take long for union leaders to squash the idea; a group of correction officers turned out and accused business leaders of meddling and representing the "corporate elite of Westchester."

"We're not blaming county workers at all," said William Mooney, president of the association. "What we're talking about here are financial issues. At the end of the day, what we don't want here in Westchester or New York state

is what's happening in Washington."

Joined by a dozen or so business leaders, including WCA Chairman Al DelBello, at the rotunda of the county office building, Mooney called on union workers to start paying a portion of their health coverage costs, which they currently do not.

The \$19 million in savings could protect hundreds of jobs scheduled for elimination and help fund important programs that may get cut, Mooney said. It's good for taxpayers, businesses and workers, he said.

The message echoes what County Executive Rob Astorino has been asking for unsuccessfully in his "Jobs for Savings" plan to avert layoffs.

He recently proposed a \$1.69 billion budget that slashed \$100 million in

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spending, including monies for workers and programs like parks, health centers and day care.

The request also parallels what Gov. Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat, laid out for the state's workforce and isn't all that unreasonable, Mooney said.

A group of correction representatives on their way to budget hearings with the Board of Legislators stopped by and had their own rebuttal ; having a business group involved in contract talks is a nonstarter, they said.

"We are appalled that a private group like Westchester County Association would think they have some right to throw themselves into the negotiations process of civil service employees in Westchester County and start questioning what we're negotiating for," said Robert Buckley, president of the Westchester County Correction Superior Officers Benevolent Association, the union representing roughly 120 ranking officers.

"We will negotiate at the negotiation table with the proper people," he said.

The root sources for high taxes in Westchester are with schools, which make up about 65 percent of the load,

and with state-imposed mandates that are passed down to the county, Buckley said.

He also challenged tax breaks given to businesses and took issue with WCA's vocal stances on having employees contribute to their health care.

"You have a position. You have a position against the unions," Buckley said of WCA. "If you're so concerned about taxes, why don't you pay your whole load of taxes and stop asking for breaks?"

There are eight unions representing workers in county government; six are working with an expired contract and two — including CSEA, the largest, and nurses — are to expire at the end of the year.

The two county police unions are in

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arbitration, the county said.

Karen Pecora, CSEA's president, said it's deceitful for Astorino to claim that the union has rejected a jobs plan when he's never presented one.

"Thanks, but no thanks. Don't do us any favors," Pecora said in a statement. "Paired with County Executive Astorino's recent union-bashing media tour, stunts like today's 'offer' do nothing to contribute to meaningful progress in negotiations. For all the grandstanding Astorino has been doing on Fox Business News, he's never even presented his much-touted 'Jobs for Savings' plan in the only venue where it can actually be considered: contract negotiations."

The Astorino administration, which has been vocal in its desire to have union members kick in for health care, welcomed WCA's support.

"It's helpful that people and organizations come out and support this view," said Donna Greene, a spokeswoman for the county executive.

After the news conference, which had an atypical and impromptu back-and-forth between the groups, Mooney approached the union leaders, shook their hands, and explained his

rationale.

"You are a gentleman," Buckley responded, "but we disagree with your position."

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