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## Now the hard part: making spending cuts

Rob Astorino, incoming Westchester County executive, was elected with a clear mandate to cut property taxes. Now comes the hard part, actually making cuts in county spending that will be significant enough to be reflected in a homeowner's property tax bill.

Just days before his landslide victory, Astorino issued a "15-Point Blueprint to Tax Relief," which can provide a road map - written in broad strokes, of course - of the direction Astorino might take. The Republican's top three points speak to the biggest cost of any government entity: labor. Astorino plans to cut 10 percent from the county executive's office, institute a hiring freeze and jobs cut through attrition, require management to contribute to their health-care costs and negotiate "modest contributions" from union employees for their health coverage.

But how much money will the job freeze save? Astorino also pledged to make his labor savings without instituting layoffs. And what about these "modest contributions" from union employee contributions? How much savings will that generate?

"We have to see what he means by that," E.J. McMahon, director of the fiscally conservative Manhattan Institute's Empire Center for New York State Policy, told the Editorial Board. "You could say, 'Boy, he sounds weak, or middling,' but it seems to me that he left himself a lot of room. We'll see how he chooses to cut things like police, or civil service employees. He has a mandate; the public would be with him if he took a tough line."

C. Scott Vanderhoef, who was just re-elected to a fifth term as Rockland County executive, said voters this year were not so much anti-incumbent as they were frustrated. And who can blame them, with unemployment now officially at 10.2 percent, the ongoing foreclosure crisis, the uncertain future? The frustration showed, Vanderhoef told the Editorial Board, in low voter turnout.

## The talks to come

Westchester's contract for the Civil Service Employees Association, which represents 4,000 county workers, runs through 2011. The county police union contract expired in 2006 and is in arbitration. One step Astorino could take would be to stop the secrecy that surrounds contract negotiations and instead reveal to the public what the negotiations involve as they go along, not when the deal is already finalized and it's ready to be signed. Secrecy benefits the unions, not the taxpayers.

Transparency would have the added benefits of giving the public a realistic understanding of what the cost of desired services actually are. Westchester would also serve as a model for school districts - whose union contracts are the biggest drivers of tax increases - to follow. Of course, instituting such transparent contract negotiations would require an uncommon political will and courage. Westchester taxpayers will be looking for clear signs of both.

## Help from Albany

There are obstacles in state labor law that work against the taxpayer. The Taylor law, which sets the ground rules for public employee negotiations, makes it difficult for elected officials to be tough negotiators, McMahon said. Provisions like compulsory binding arbitration for police and firefighter contracts deter creative negotiation and almost ensure regular wage increases.

Another provision - the Triborough Amendment - requires that provisions of an existing public employees' contract remain in place - like raises for step increases - even when the contract is expired.

Only the state Legislature, whose members very often cower at the thought of upsetting public employee unions, can make those changes. The effects of requirements like these is seen in ever-increasing property tax bills.

William Mooney, president of the business and public policy group the Westchester County Association, spoke about the impact of the public-employee compensation system last week at a state Senate Finance Committee hearing in Greenburgh.

He called for reform of the compensation structure, specifically mentioning the Triborough Amendment. Long gone are the days when public employees had to be lured with good benefits packages because they are paid less, he said.

"New York state leads the pack in terms of generous public-sector compensation. Only one state (Alaska) pays higher government wages and salaries per capita than we do," said Mooney. "Sixty-nine percent of New York state public-sector employees belong to collective bargaining units, which is the highest in the nation."

## Wooing Democrats

To achieve any success on labor costs, Astorino would be wise to seek support from all corners. Although they constitute a majority on the Board of Legislators, wise Democrats might take note of this year's election results and work with him.

"There are a thousand really interesting questions to be asked" about where to cut, said county legislator Michael Kaplowitz, D-Somers. "I'm excited because I think they should be asked."

At his first press conference as county executive-elect, Astorino stood outside of his modest colonial home in Hawthorne and seemed every inch the regular guy he claims to be. His wife, Sheila, brought out tea and hot chocolate and his daughter, Kiley Rose, 4, darted out of the house to watch all the fuss.

Astorino said the election results would reverberate beyond Westchester.

"This has statewide implications," Astorino said. "Hopefully, we'll be an example in Albany as well."

That is a hope that taxpayers share.