



November 19, 2009

Business group hires accountants to find cutbacks for Westchester budget

Gerald McKinstry
gmckinst@lohud.com

A Westchester County business group says the county executive's \$1.8 billion budget proposal is "unacceptable" because it raises taxes — so it's putting its own bean counters on the job.

The Westchester County Association on Wednesday criticized County Executive Andrew Spano's plan, which would raise taxes 4.9 percent if approved by the county Board of Legislators, as being too costly for the current economy.

Spano, who recently lost his re-election bid to Republican Rob Astorino, released his proposal Monday.

Businesses and residents are making painful sacrifices to survive the deep recession and the county should as well, said William Mooney, WCA's president.

Taxpayers and business leaders are at a breaking point and cannot afford to pay more and government is simply too large in this state and county, Mooney said.

"It's hard to say you're at an austerity budget when you have a 5 percent increase. Austerity is not a 4 to 5 percent increase," Mooney said. "It's got to be zero or below. Anything more than zero is unacceptable."

Mooney cited the elimination of 37 positions, 34 of which are vacant, as poor examples of budget-cutting given the county's workforce of just under 5,000 people.

The business group has also assembled a team of independent certified public accountants to review the budget and offer changes with hopes of lessening the burden on taxpayers. The group will be headed by Howard Klein, managing partner of Eisman, Zucker, Klein & Ruttenberg in White Plains.

Another group, the League of Women Voters of Westchester, is sponsoring a budget forum at 1 p.m. Thursday. Budget Director Ann Reasoner, First Deputy Budget Director John J. Delaney, and Deputy Budget Director Arthur Vietro will present the budget and take questions.

County board members are currently meeting with department heads and reviewing the numbers. They're holding several public hearings, including one Thursday night in Mount Vernon.

The county board must approve a budget by Dec. 31 — a deadline that Mooney encouraged lawmakers to make full use of, so the public has as much time as possible to scrutinize the budget.

Board Chairman William Ryan, D-White Plains, agreed with Mooney on the need to cut the increase, but he said the business group would serve taxpayers better if it convened a public-policy committee rather than accountants. Ryan said the tough decisions for legislators aren't necessarily about numbers, but choosing which services to provide.

"This isn't an accounting problem," Ryan said. "This is about public-policy decisions. This is about whether or not a child is fed. This isn't about accounting rules."

Legislator George Oros, R-Cortlandt, said the business association has been consistent in its calls for cuts, unlike some of his Democratic colleagues who have signed off on tax increases. He said the Republican minority on the board was working on its own plan with a goal of a zero percent tax increase.

"I'm flabbergasted by some of the Johnny-come-latelys," Oros said. "We do have our work cut out for us. We've got to take a wholesale approach to this."

Additional Facts

Meeting planned

The League of Women Voters of Westchester is sponsoring a meeting Thursday to help taxpayers understand Westchester County's proposed 2010 budget. The meeting will be at 1 p.m. Thursday at Scarsdale Congregational Church, 1 Heathcote Road, Scarsdale. County Executive Andrew Spano released his \$1.8 billion budget proposal Monday and the county Board of Legislators will hold public hearings before approving a final budget. For more information, log on to www.LWVwestchester.org.