



Testa Urges Employee Benefits Cost Savings

My Guest Commentary below appeared in the February 25th edition of the North County News:

“Westchester is the highest taxed County in the country. During these tough economic times, our representatives in government have an obligation to find ways to reduce the tremendous burden on taxpayers.” With those words I began my successful campaign to become your Westchester County Legislator. Barely six weeks into the New Year, the situation in White Plains has gone from bad to worse; a rocky economy, additional state budget cuts, continued high unemployment, revenue shortfalls, and a looming \$60 million dollar County budget deficit next year. You would think my fellow legislators would be scrambling for ways to bring relief to the hard pressed citizens of Westchester, wouldn't you? Sadly, nothing could be further from the truth.

The Democratic majority in the County Legislature is either unwilling or unable to face reality; government on *all* levels must become smaller, more efficient and more responsive. Yet my Democratic colleagues have added three new committees to the County legislature, not counting the *“Special Committee on Health Insurance Savings,”* that I found I was appointed to only when I received the press release! In fact, the whole issue of County Executive Rob Astorino's proposals to reduce the cost of employee benefits and the Majority legislators' response is an eye opener. I, along with my GOP colleagues, have been calling on a swift adoption of the County Executives proposal that will bring \$1.2 million in savings. Additionally, the members of the Board of Legislators should vote to voluntarily include themselves in this policy, just as Astorino did weeks ago. We must lead and set the example.

Somehow requiring employees to contribute 15% toward the cost of their health care is now *linked* to studying the cost of providing the benefit itself. Speaking for myself and my fellow Republicans, these are two separate issues. Whatever the costs or plans offered, employees should pay at least 15% and they should be doing it *now*. Studying various health care plans to determine “the fairest and most economic policy that...can provide tax-payers long term savings,” as stated in the Board press release, is already being done through the County Executive's office. So, you have to ask yourself, why the delay and how sincere is this effort? Given the fact that the County's current health insurance contract was renewed for *two more years* in the last weeks of the Spano Administration, despite being called on not to do so by the incoming administration and Republican legislators. Not to mention that no competitive bids had been solicited for at least five years prior to this last minute maneuver!

Just this past week, Rob Astorino's call to reduce payouts of accumulated vacation and sick time by departing non-unionized employees was met with resistance by members of the County Board. The last time this practice was curtailed was over 12 years ago. County Executive Astorino is talking about *limiting*, not ending the practice, yet some legislators are concerned about the impact on the “exemplary attendance” of employees! I don't know about you, but in this economy I would think having a job would be incentive enough.

There are a host of critical issues confronting all levels of government today. Westchester County is not immune to these pressures and cannot afford to turn a deaf ear to the concerns of citizens who require that, we as elected officials be more responsive, accountable, transparent and prudent in how we manage the resources entrusted to us. We at the Board of Legislators should be taking the lead to effect real, substantial and rapid change to the culture of excessive spending and *aparalysis by analysis* approach to governing that has characterized County Government for years.

I will continue to fight for the changes and policies that are needed to save taxpayer dollars and create a more responsive and efficient county government. I know you join me in my dedication to preserve Westchester County as a place in which children, our future generations and we can afford to live and enjoy the quality of life we all deserve.

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