

John G. Testa
Legislator, 1st District
Minority Leader



Committee Assignments:
Budget & Appropriations
Community Services
Economic Development
Energy & Environment
Legislation

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Contact: Minority Leader, Legislator John Testa

914-760-9773, jgtesta@verizon.net

Westchester Legislators Receive Facts on 'Raise the Age' Unfunded Mandates

At a meeting of the Committee on Budget & Appropriations, the Westchester County Board of Legislators (BOL) received testimony and supporting data on the unfunded mandates associated with New York State's 'Raise the Age' proposal. The committee, chaired by Legislator Sheila Marcotte (R – Eastchester) invited Rocco Pozzi, commissioner of the Department of Probation, and Kevin McGuire, commissioner of the Department of Social Services, to inform the BOL of the financial impact to their departments if 'Raise the Age' becomes law in New York State.

“Based on some of the statements I’ve read from my colleagues, there seems to be a lack of understanding as to what the County’s obligations will be under the new law and what those obligations will cost taxpayers,” Marcotte said. “The County Executive first raised concerns about the cost of this program last week, and the testimony we received in committee today fully supports those concerns. Just like the County Executive, our opposition to the Governor’s proposal is not to the intent, but to the lack of funding. If the current ‘Raise the Age’ legislation becomes law, it will become one of the largest unfunded mandates in our budget.”

Pozzi and McGuire demonstrated to the committee how the proposed ‘Raise the Age’ legislation requires new responsibilities of the Probation and Social Services Departments, as well as the county’s Law Department, and how those new responsibilities will mean significant infrastructure investments as well as dozens of new county employees.

Westchester County Legislator John Testa (R – Peekskill), leader of the Republican caucus, says the BOL unanimously opposes unfunded mandates—a key component of the annual legislative packet they send to the state legislature as a resolution. With the facts now in front of them, he expects his colleagues to unanimously oppose ‘Raise the Age,’ or any state proposal that is not fully funded by the State.

Tel: (914) 995-2828 • Fax: (914) 995-3884 • E-mail: Testa@westchesterlegislators.com

“Over the past few months, my colleagues from the Democratic caucus have made a dangerous habit of supporting the Governor’s proposals sight unseen,” Testa said. “The fact is, ‘Raise the Age’ as it’s currently proposed will be a significant new unfunded mandate. Thanks to the efforts of Legislator Marcotte and the testimony by our commissioners, the unfunded costs of these new mandates are evident to the Board and we should stand united in opposition to them, unless accompanied with the appropriate State funding.”

Commissioner Pozzi testified to the impact on the Department of Probation, which would handle the intake and supervision of the new family court population created by ‘Raise the Age.’ Pozzi estimates he would need to add ten new probation officers and two new supervising probation officers, at a cost of \$1.7 million. To accommodate the increased juvenile population from Westchester and the surrounding counties in the Hudson Valley region under the supervision of Probation, the capacity at secure and non-secure detention facilities would need to double at a cost of \$9.9 million (renovation) to \$20 million (new facility).

Commissioner McGuire testified to the impact on the Department of Social Services, with a direct financial impact of approximately \$15 million per year and a ripple effect on the operations and workflow within the department. With the increased juvenile population in the Family Court’s jurisdiction, more youth will be placed in the care and custody of the Commissioner of Social Services and placed in non-secure residential facilities at an average cost of \$150,000 per year per juvenile. Social Services would need to hire new staff and incur additional costs for residential facilities, contracts for services, and space to create new Family Support Centers. At least 50 more youth would be placed in the Foster Care system, an 8% increase in the caseload that also requires more staff to be hired.

Both Commissioners also pointed out that the increased caseload in the Family Court will require increased staffing in the County Law Department, which prosecutes Family Court cases.

“85 cents of every tax dollar collected by Westchester County goes to pay the state’s unfunded mandates. Despite promises to reign in unfunded mandates that percentage has not changed in the five years since I was elected despite reforms to Medicaid and pensions. We are still waiting on the State to fully fund the Governor’s so-called Safe Act, and no part of the ‘Raise the Age’ initiative addresses the significant new costs to counties,” Testa said.

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