

Last Chance New Year Sale Ends 1/3 \$9⁹⁹ / YR.

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\$14M budget deficit projected for Westchester

Mark Lungariello, mlungariel@lohud.com Published 4:55 p.m. ET May 19, 2017 | Updated 3:18 p.m. ET May 24, 2017

Administration calls number "very manageable" and says it expects a surplus when the books are closed on 2016.



(Photo: Peter Carr/The Journal News)

Westchester County is projecting a \$14.3 million budget shortfall, due in part to sales tax coming in lower than expected.

The administration calls that number "very manageable" and is expecting to close the gap by the end of the year but some lawmakers say a pattern of revenue-hungry budgets has meant using overly optimistic revenue projections year after year.

Westchester County Executive Rob Astorino, a Republican, hasn't raised the property tax levy since he came into office and that's meant managing shortfalls through means including cuts and one-shot revenues like land sales.

Ned McCormack, a spokesman for Astorino, said the estimates were close, representing less than 1 percent of the total \$1.8 billion county budget.

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"We're less than a percent off in May, so that's good," he said. "We'll continue to manage things very carefully and throughout the year the numbers change and they always do and we're comfortable with where we are."

The county projected a \$17.6 million deficit in May 2016, but is now expecting to close out the year with a surplus of between \$1 million and \$2 million, pending final numbers. Last year's budget was buoyed, in part, by the sale of a property in Yonkers that netted Westchester \$15 million to mostly close that gap.

Mike Kaplowitz, a Democrat and chairman of the county Board of Legislators, has said the refusal to raise taxes even under a state-mandated cap has left little wiggle room for the county. It's become an annual watch on where the revenue numbers will end up, he said.

"Yeah, there's a lot of déjà vu going around," he said. "It's like revenue 'Groundhog Day.'"

To make up for uncertain revenues elsewhere, there is added pressure to approve one-shots, including an Astorino proposal to lease out the county-owned airport to a private operator, Kaplowitz said. Westchester is expecting \$15 million in revenue from that deal this year, although there are questions over if it will get done.

Kaplowitz said although it was early in the year, he was concerned about long-term budget stability.

"The concern remains that eventually you run out of financial magic and you have no more accounting tricks to balance your budget," he said.

Sales tax is the second-largest income for the county after property taxes. In April, the county is seeing a 4 percent decrease in sales tax from the first year. The first quarter saw 1 percent in growth over 2016 – 1 percent less than its budget target.

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Also contributing to budget are reductions from state funding, and bus fares coming in lower than expected. Some \$750,000 was budgeted in a deal to turn over county-owned Playland amusement park to a private company, but the deadline to pay has been extended.

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Part of the deficit could be plugged if lawmakers approve \$3.5 million in borrowing to pay corporate back-tax settlements called certioraris.

McCormack, Astorino's spokesman, said all the projections were only a "snapshot."

"Whether you're at a surplus or a deficit, the estimates are just estimates," he said. "We're very careful with the pennies and then they turn into dollars."

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