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## Tax Watch: Astorino's lame duck \$1.8 billion budget gamble

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Tax Watch columnist David McKay Wilson explores Rob Astorino's 2018 Westchester County budget.



(Photo: David McKay Wilson/The Journal News)

Talk about mailing it in.

That's what lame-duck Westchester County Executive Rob Astorino did with the 2018 county budget.

A week after he was denied a third term by state Sen. George Latimer, D-Rye, [Astorino announced his budget](/story/news/politics/2017/11/13/2018-westchester-county-budget/859790001/) in the late afternoon, via news release, without a news conference where he could be questioned about his financial plan for the county he has led since 2010.

It was a break from Westchester tradition. His predecessor, Andy Spano, put on a public face to present his final budget after Astorino denied him a fourth term in 2009.

**FLAT: Astorino's 2018 budget doesn't raise taxes** (</story/news/politics/2017/11/13/2018-westchester-county-budget/859790001/>)

**DEAL: Astorino chooses Macquarie for airport privatization** (</story/news/local/westchester/2017/11/09/astorino-winning-bid-westchester-airport/849166001/>)

**NO PROBLEM: No airport deal, no \$15 million, no problem** (</story/money/personal-finance/taxes/david-mckay-wilson/2017/11/01/westchester-airport-deal-tax-watch/819356001/>)

**ELECTION: How Latimer defeated Astorino, by neighborhood: Map** (</story/news/politics/elections/2017/11/15/westchester-county-executive-election-2017-results-map/861823001/>)

Astorino wasn't around Monday to answer questions about his \$1.8 billion spending plan, which includes a \$30 million gamble from the airport privatization deal that county legislators say they won't address until Latimer takes office in January.

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If he had been, we could have asked him about the elimination of seven of 26 jobs in the county executive's office, or the gutting of the county Public Works Department by proposing the elimination of 12 engineering-related jobs in the Department of Public Works and Transportation.

He also wasn't available to answer questions about his astounding proposal to add 20 jobs to the patronage mill at the county Board of Elections, where the chairmen of the Republican and Democratic parties serve as election commissioners, in charge of hiring. Some of those jobs could provide employment for Astorino Republican appointees swept out by a Democratic wave on Nov. 8.

I emailed questions on those issues to Astorino's press shop. No luck.

"The budget speaks for itself," said Astorino spokesman Jerry McKinstry. "It is now before the Board of Legislators for their review, modifications and approval before the end of the year."



County Legislator MaryJane Shimsky, D-Hastings-on-Hudson, said she heard the budget's message, loud and clear.

"The budget document is untenable," she said. "It shows that Rob only cared about the politics, and never care about making sure the people of Westchester got what they needed. Now that he's not going to run for govern he's trying to provide a soft landing for as many as possible."

Republican Elections Commissioner Doug Colety said he requested the 20 jobs to improve election-inspector training and have more personnel on hand for election night. Westchester's 90-person Board of Elections is understaffed compared to Nassau County, with 160 employees, and Suffolk County, with 124, Colety insists.

**Legislator MaryJane Shimsky said the new Board of Elections jobs could provide a soft landing for Republican appointees who will lose jobs in the transition.** (Photo: David McKay Wilson/The Journal News)

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Those Long Island counties, however, are significantly larger than Westchester, which has a population of 1 million, compared to 1.4 million in Nassau and 1.5 million in Suffolk.

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Elections Commissioners Doug Colety, left, and Reggie Lafayette, would have 20 new jobs under the 2018 county budget proposal. (Photo: David McKay Wilson/The Jou News)

“We could have training in the evening without having to pay overtime,” Colety said. “Adding those 20 jobs would cut overtime by \$1.2 million. It almost pays for itself.”

The budget discussions began on Tuesday with a cold dose of financial reality.

The legislature’s Committee on Budget and Appropriations learned first-hand the financial mountain legislators will need to climb over the next four weeks.

All eight of Westchester’s public-employee unions are working on expired contracts. Settling the contract for Westchester’s corrections officers will cost \$10 million over two years. It will cost an estimated \$40 million to settle the contract for the 3,000-member Civil Service Employees Association, which hasn’t had a raise since 2011, said county Finance Director Larry Soule.

Astorino’s seven years of no-tax increase budgets have taken their toll. The 2017 budget was balanced, in part, on a \$15 million one-shot from the air privatization deal that never materialized. Soule told legislators that the county is projected to run a \$16 million deficit for 2017.



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Westchester County Board of Legislators Majority Leader Catherine Borgia, D-Ossining, said the budget was the "shakiest" of Astorino's house-of-cards budgets. (Photo by David McKay Wilson/The Journal News)

"This is the shakiest of Rob Astorino's house-of-cards budgets," said county board Majority Leader Catherine Borgia, D-Ossining.

Nevertheless, Legislator Sheila Marcotte, R-Eastchester, who chairs the Budget Committee, still believes the board can deliver on Astorino's no-tax increase budget.

"The question is: Will there be the political will to do it?" said Marcotte, who lost her re-election bid.

Latimer ran against the airport deal, which he said was bad for Westchester. No matter. Astorino lost the election, then literally doubled down on his unpopular plan, including \$30 million from the yet-to-be approved deal in the 2018 spending plan.

Board of Legislators Chairman Mike Kaplowitz, D-Somers, said the airport deal was off the table until Latimer takes office, creating a gaping budget hole.

"We need to close the \$30 million budget gap which imperils both the county's reserve fund and our good credit rating," said Kaplowitz.

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Board of Legislators Chairman Mike Kaplowitz, D-Somers, says any action on the airport privatization will wait until 2018. (Photo: David McKay Wilson/The Journal News)



Complicating matters is what happens with sales-tax revenues in the fourth quarter of 2017, Soule told the legislators. Sales-tax revenues were on a trajectory to come in \$6 million over budget, due to increases in gasoline prices.

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A week before the election, Astorino spoke to the Municipal Budget Watchers group more //personal-finance/taxes/david-mckay-wilson/80741&/01/westchester-airport-deal-tax-watch/819356001/) that the county budget wouldn't suffer from the loss of \$15 million from the airport deal because gas prices had risen, providing a boost in sales-tax revenues. I asked what had happened over the past two weeks to change the situation from a balanced budget to a \$16 million deficit.

McKinstry said the budget spoke for itself.

So did Westchester voters.

David McKay Wilson writes the Tax Watch column for The Journal News/lohud.

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