

2009 Monroe County budget fails taxpayers

On Dec. 9, the Monroe County Legislature adopted the 2009 county budget. Unfortunately, the budget for next year is devoid of the difficult decisions demanded during an economic crisis, and continues the irresponsible fiscal policies and partisan priorities that are sending Monroe County in the wrong direction. For these reasons, we both voted against it and offer this essay to further explain why.

We feel the 2009 County Budget is a poor fiscal plan for the following reasons:

- It raises the property tax levy by over \$10 million.
- It increases spending by more than the rate of inflation.
- It uses \$32 million of “one-shots” to steal future revenues to close today’s budget deficit, while inflaming the future budget short-fall.
- It fails to address, and in fact increases, a \$104 million structural deficit in the next two years.
- It deceptively re-categorizes spending, to avoid legal spending limits.
- It was passed by the Republican majority on a 15-14 party-line vote, without making any substantive amendments to the proposal by the County Executive.

The best part of the budget is that it does not raise the property tax rate.

We recognize that raising property taxes is not the answer to the budget crisis, as it only shifts the

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county’s financial burden to already overstretched, over-taxed residents.

The worst part of the 2009 budget is the extensive use – to the tune of \$32 million – of so-called “one-shot” revenue sources. The term “one-shot” refers to the practice of infusing money into the budget in a manner that does not recur. It is an unsustainable practice, which the county has relied upon far too heavily in recent years through the sale of buildings like the Civic Center Parking Garage.

What makes this year’s use of “one-shots” particularly disturbing is that this time, the county is selling income from future years. Part of this comes about from selling the rights to collect delinquent taxes, and part comes from sale of income due the county from its payment-in-lieu-of-taxes (PILOT) program.

The problem is that these future revenue streams are sold at a reduced rate in exchange for the money upfront today, and the revenues are then no longer available in the future – a future with record deficits already. To make an analogy to your own household, this would be like getting a cash-advance for the paychecks you will receive in February, March and April of 2010 – it may help you pay today’s bills, but it makes your prospects for 2010 really terrible!

The 2009 county budget is irresponsible. Democrats have called for a change away from “borrow and spend” to a “pay-as-you-go” approach – the same sound fiscal management taxpayers must use in their households.

However, rather than adopting a Democratic proposal that would have required county department heads to develop plans to reduce the growth in spending by 2 percent, majority county legislators voted to continue the practices that have brought the county to the brink of financial disaster.

We believe that, instead of selling future revenues at a discounted price, a better idea would be to rein in costs. We should be able to do at least as well as nearby Onondaga County, which kept the spending increase down to 25 percent of the inflation rate. Addressing spending isn't easy, but we must do this instead of taking money from our future. Every county department, every county program must find

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ways to provide services in a more cost-efficient manner.

The financial problem this county is facing comes from years of continued failure to plan and implement long-term solutions to the ongoing operational deficits, and an unwillingness to make difficult decisions. Monroe County did not get into this fiscal mess overnight and we cannot get out of it overnight. But our proposals are a first step in the right direction.

True leadership, especially in these economic hard times, requires that we address spending, rein in costs and end the practice of borrowing for minor projects. Most importantly, we have to stop grabbing tomorrow’s revenues for today’s expenses. Taxpayers and the residents of Monroe County are faced with tightening their belts to provide for their families. We in the county should do nothing less.