

## County finances

# Prescribing bipartisan remedy for budget ills



**CARLA PALUMBO**  
GUEST  
ESSAYIST

**M**onroe County Executive Maggie Brooks finally unveiled her \$1 billion budget plan, the largest in county history. It raises more questions than it answers and is another Band-Aid budget that doesn't address the basic structural imbalance that continues to plague this county. It is built on fiscal gimmicks and raises serious questions about Brooks' claims regarding the future

state of county finances.

Earlier this year, the county executive claimed we had a \$100 million deficit for 2007 and 2008. She claimed that the only solution would be to shift the cost of Medicaid to the towns, suburban schools and the city, and raise the sales tax to a whopping 8.75 cents on the dollar.

Democrats in the County Legislature resisted and questioned whether a tax increase was necessary. We proposed cost savings and better government to balance the budget without a tax increase. Supported by our state Assembly members, we saved taxpayers

\$117 million by refusing to go along with the county executive's push to raise the sales tax, an increase that proved to be unnecessary.

In her 2007 budget, the county executive found enough one-shot deals to balance the budget but did nothing to address the basic structural problems brought on by two decades of Republican mismanagement. She claims once again that a \$100 million deficit is looming for 2009 and that she needs to shift Medicaid costs to the towns, city and school districts by raising taxes. That is no community solution.

Over the past two decades, GOP administrations have gotten very good at pointing fingers and very bad at facing reality. It is easy to blame the county's budget problems on mandated spending. The county is required by various state and federal laws to spend part of its revenue on public services like maintaining a jail, paying a district attorney, and yes, paying for Medicaid. The reality is that the combined cost of Medicaid, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and Safety Net is budgeted to cost less in 2007 than in 2005. Furthermore, Medicaid will cost 15.4 percent less than in 2004.

The county executive should take a page from Mayor Bob Duffy's book — address the cause of the county's fiscal

problems with a new approach, one that is open and transparent and includes the ideas and opinions of Democrats and Republicans. This community can no longer afford the current administration and majority legislators' absolute refusal to work with Democratic legislators.

In March, the County Legislature's Democratic Caucus presented the 20-point "Blueprint for Progress." This budget-

cutting plan details a number of cost-saving measures that would solve our fiscal crisis without a tax increase. Since then we have introduced several

of these measures as legislation. Every single Democratic proposal has been shot down by Republicans more interested in toeing the political line than reducing the tax burden on county residents.

Make no mistake: The county executive was very clear in her recent budget address to the legislature that a tax increase is still on her agenda, as is shifting costs to the towns, city and school districts. This, in light of an almost \$40 million increase in the property tax levy since she took office. This, at a time when the Spitzer administration is poised to reform the way the state does business with counties. Gov.-elect Eliot Spitzer is already looking at ways to lower property taxes and costs to counties. The county administration should not be looking for a tax increase for 2008.

Democrats remain dedicated to real community solutions that we can support without the need to raise taxes. We know this community deserves a fiscal plan that is long term, structurally sound and includes ideas regardless of the political affiliation of the person making them. We will continue to reach across the aisle to achieve that goal. □

*Palumbo, D-Rochester, is minority leader, Monroe County Legislature. E-mail her at Carly1002@aol.com.*

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