

Monroe County budget: Deceptive, dangerous

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Monroe County has the dubious honor of having the highest property taxes in America when compared to home values. To address what most people consider one of the biggest problems facing our community, Democrats for the second straight year proposed to reduce property taxes in the county budget. This year, rather than dole out raises for political appointees, we offered a real property tax cut that would eliminate the increase proposed by County Executive Maggie Brooks and cut the tax rate for all residents. For the second straight year, Republicans failed to support relief for property taxpayers.

On Dec. 14, the Republican majority of the County Legislature passed the budget proposed by the county executive — along party lines without a single modification. They say the budget spends \$931 million, keeps your taxes flat, doesn't cut your services, and protects you as a taxpayer.



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The facts suggest otherwise: The budget actually spends more than \$1.5 billion. That's 63 percent more than indicated in the operating budget total. More than \$400 million of your taxes are collected and spent, but your county government considers them "off-budget."

For years, the county executive has repeated that her hands are tied because of mandates — up to 82 percent of the budget this year. What she doesn't tell you is that only 22 percent of the budget is an UNFUNDED mandate. The rest of the budget — more than three-quarters of all spending — is either directly funded or the level of funding is controlled at the local level.

Property taxes are increasing, just as they have every

year during this administration — more than 25 percent. Don't be fooled that your tax rate is "stable" at \$8.99: Millions of dollars of spending increases have been pushed to other charges on the property tax bill that you will receive in a few weeks.

This budget violates the Taxpayer Protection Act because it raises discretionary spending by more than the rate of inflation. This is the third straight year this law has been broken — every year since voters overwhelmingly approved it in 2007.

Worst of all, this budget exacerbates our massive budget deficit by borrowing more money for short-term use. Pension payments are deferred, tax liens will be sold, and existing debt will be refinanced. These are all destructive financial gimmicks that increase the amount of money we'll owe in the near future, while reducing our ability to pay for it.

What does this say to you?

It says the county executive and the Legislature's Republican majority are using the

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budget to deceive you — because their failure to make tough decisions is jeopardizing you and every other county taxpayer.

Some people will wrongly say these are just political games and every year we overcome our deficit problem with creative solutions that protect taxpayers.

Facts are facts. Our county spends more than it can afford, and this budget makes it worse. It increases our deficit by taking more money from the future to pay for today, and it offers no plan to lead us out of this situation anytime soon.

Eventually, facts must be faced. The failure to do so for

the past few years has accelerated the problem, especially now that federal stimulus dollars are gone. Without any long-term approach to stabilize county finances, the result will be a state-mandated control board that will not hesitate to take quick, drastic action to prevent bankruptcy. That means slashing services and massive tax hikes.

At that point, it will be too late to protect taxpayers. **Ted O'Brien, D-Irondequoit, represents Monroe County's 17th Legislative District and is the Legislature's minority leader. Vincent Esposito, D-Irondequoit, represents the 16th District and is deputy minority leader.**