

## Kids should be valued in budget

Written by

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As nonpartisan, independent child and youth advocates, we at Westchester Children's Association are dismayed that funds for several important programs and services that were included in the county budget for 2011 are not being spent.

The discrepancy between the budgeted and expended amounts has become another bone of contention between the Board of Legislators and County Executive Rob Astorino, as was demonstrated in the recent clash over the Invest in Kids funding for youth programs. ("Westchester Dems, Astorino feud over Youth Bureau funds," June 27 article.)

The argument between the two branches of county government centers mostly on which one has the authority to decide how budgeted funds are spent. But this argument overshadows more fundamental questions: What community values do we want to express in our county budget? What are the most pressing needs of our county's young people? How should limited county resources be allocated to express those values and meet those needs?

Ideally, these questions are discussed and resolved during the annual budget process.

In 2010, the Board of Legislators crafted and passed a budget that seemed to express the core values of saving taxpayer dollars while preserving services.

In fact, the services that were preserved (child-care subsidies, youth programs) deliver additional long-term tax savings to schools and communities by supporting children's school success, preparing youth for the workforce and preventing homelessness, to name a few outcomes.

### Spotlight on values

Sadly, the decision of the Astorino administration to withhold budgeted funds expresses only one value: limit government spending, regardless of its impact on people, and despite the availability of funds. This was made clear when Mary Kate Cabaleiro, director of the county Youth Bureau, explained to the Board of Legislators that the recent 7 percent cuts to programs were made because the county executive asked her to make them, not

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based on any analysis of the importance or impact of the programs.

This value seems in direct contrast to Mr. Astorino's vision of Westchester that he so aptly expressed in his State of the County address: to nurture and retain talent in Westchester and to bring forward the less fortunate amongst us.

In the same address, he also described a county government where smoke and mirrors aren't needed to keep it running. Unfortunately, despite early campaign promises, the administration has failed to provide greater transparency in operations or expenditures.

Without such transparency, statements such as the recent comment from top aide Ned McCormack that, despite cumulative budget cuts of about 16 percent over the past two years, programs funded by Invest in Kids are serving 15 percent more young people, are hard to support.

### **Invest in children**

We and our advocacy partners have suggested two steps that would greatly improve transparency and help to make future budget discussions more open and productive. First, each government department should articulate a mission and vision for its operations. These should be supported by clear and quantifiable outcome goals. Progress toward these goals should be regularly posted on the departmental websites, as is done in New York City.

Second, county budget, revenues and expenditures should be available on the county website in a manner that the average interested citizen can understand. It should include the vendor, amount and purpose of all contracts, including those with for-profit entities, such as law firms and IT consultants, which rarely receive public scrutiny. The bill introduced earlier this year by Legislator Sheila Marcotte, R-Tuckahoe, to encourage more transparency into the county budget process was a step in the right direction, but did not go far enough. Without full transparency, smoke and mirrors remain the status quo.

In the end, the county budget is a statement of priorities, a document that declares which values our community treasures most. In these times, it is also a document that needs to be examined and re-examined as the economy changes. But changing budget numbers also means changing county priorities, and that is a discussion that needs to take place publicly, with public participation. Fiscal responsibility is a very good value indeed;

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however, it should not be the only value that the county holds dear. We would hope that Astorino and the board would both agree that investing in children is an important priority, and that we should not address fiscal issues in the present by sacrificing our future.

**The writer is executive director of the White Plains-based advocacy organization Westchester Children's Association.**

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