Legislators override Breslin veto

Albany County lawmakers' vote keeps tax hike at 8 percent

By **CAROL DEMARE**, Staff writer

Published 11:16 p.m., Wednesday, December 14, 2011

ALBANY — County lawmakers voted Wednesday night to override County Executive Mike Breslin's veto of the 2012 budget, thus keeping the tax hike at 8 percent instead of a jump to 13 percent had the override failed.

The vote of 27-7 came after hand-wringing by Democratic legislators who vowed to get the county on a better financial track in the new year. A two-thirds majority of the 39 members, or 26 votes, was needed for the override.

Albany Legislator Christopher Higgins was the lone Democrat to vote with the Republican minority. He warned of tight financial times ahead and told Legislature Chairman Dan McCoy, the county executive-elect, he faces "a tough job."

Breslin, a Democrat and lame duck executive who chose not to seek re-election after 17 years in office, vetoed the new budget Monday. He found fault with the $557 million spending plan legislators approved by a 29-10 vote last week, after revising Breslin's initial $565 million package that carried a 19.2 percent tax increase. Lawmakers also voted to override the state's 2 percent property tax cap.

In his veto letter, Breslin claimed the revised spending plan, crafted by the Legislature's Audit and Finance Committee, relied "on unrealistic savings and overly optimistic revenue estimates." He singled out numerous line items with which he had concerns, significantly a projected revenue increase of $2.2 million in sales taxes and a savings of $1 million in personnel services.

The resolution for the override vote "disapproved" Breslin's objections to those line items, thereby restoring them to the budget. Deputy Majority Leader Shawn Morse, chairman of the Audit and Finance Committee, explained after the meeting those items were singled out because Breslin didn't have the authority to decrease most of the other veto items.

Morse said the $1 million decrease in personnel services is the total for all county departments. Agency heads can choose their own ways to get to that level, he said.

In a statement issued after the meeting, Breslin said: "My proposed budget was very tightly drawn, much more so than in other years. The Legislature's changes place services and fiscal stability at greater risk. There is no room to account for the unknowns of the state budget and the economy."

Morse said taxpayers need relief, and the higher property tax increase had to be avoided. Through the year, if revenues do not come in as projected, adjustments will be made, he said.

"Services will remain intact, taxpayers will get a break, and we'll work a little harder to adjust to problems as they come along," Morse said.

Breslin vetoed the budget "to point out defects ... that need to be fixed as he leaves office," Loudonville Democrat Phillip Steck said. He said he pointed out some of the same problems, as did Higgins and Richard Mendick, a Selkirk Conservative.

"We need to make structural changes in the way we do business here in Albany County," Steck said.

After listening to several speakers, Republican Lee Carman of Guilderland noted taxes are going up whether 8 percent or 13 percent, there is "no relief."

Minority Leader Christine Benedict said through the years her conference has "put in several cost-savings measures which have fallen on deaf ears." The county civic center turned around financially because, while owned by the county, it is run by SMG, a private management firm, she said.

That was in response to Democratic Majority Leader Frank Commisso claims there were doubters when talk began of building a civic center, as well as a new Family Court and renovating the County Courthouse, and it all got done. Come Jan. 1, Commisso said, lawmakers will "put the county in the right direction."

Reach Carol DeMare at 454-5431 or cdemare@timesunion.com

Read more: http://www.timesunion.com/local/article/Legislators-override-Breslin-veto-2404024.php#ixzz1ghxPqpN1