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County leaders slam Spitzer's budget

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ALBANY — County executives from across New York on Tuesday ripped Gov. Eliot Spitzer's 2008-09 budget proposal, saying it adds new mandated costs and doesn't alleviate pressure on local taxpayers as he claims.

County executives expressed anger at the Democratic governor shortly after he addressed the New York State Association of Counties' annual conference. He estimated his budget would save counties about \$519 million in the coming fiscal year.

But county officials had their own figures. They said Spitzer's budget would add about \$80 million to their bottom lines because Spitzer would force counties to take on additional costs for the detention of juvenile delinquents and some social-service programs.

"We have massive cost shifts to counties," said Stephen Acquario, the association's executive director, said during a news conference after Spitzer's address. "It's a step in the wrong direction for counties in this budget."

Spitzer told county leaders during his speech that through a Medicaid cap and other cost containments, the state is seeking to lessen the burden on counties. For instance, the \$124 billion proposed budget would include a cap on counties' costs for preschool special education, a savings of about \$31 million this year.

He said the state is continuing to make new investments in the upstate economy, education and health care despite a \$4.4 billion budget gap. The fiscal year starts April 1.

Spitzer also touted plans to seek a cap on school property taxes. He has appointed a commission to come back with recommendations by mid-May on how to impose a cap and how to address state mandates on local governments.

County officials said Spitzer's talk of a \$519 million savings for counties is largely a result of a cap on Medicaid implemented by Spitzer's predecessor, George Pataki.

"That's not really a benefit to the counties," said Republican Monroe County Executive Maggie Brooks, saying counties may not want to increase fees as Spitzer proposes.

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