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## **Budget cuts to hurt localities**

**County executives protest possible cost shifts by state Legislature.**

**By Ray Finger**

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**Star-Gazette**

If Albany lawmakers shift costs to county taxpayers in the new state budget, be prepared for a long wait at your local Department of Motor Vehicles.

That was only one of many consequences predicted Friday by Chemung County Executive Tom Santulli if the state Legislature adopts a budget that increases spending and continues to hire state employees while shoving more of the cost burden onto local taxpayers.

"People should look to standing in longer lines at the license bureau because we may not have as many people to do it," said Santulli, who joined almost a dozen other county executives and officials in a statewide conference call on Friday to denounce the cost-shifting moves as Monday night's budget deadline looms.

"This state budget is shift and shaft," Santulli said. "The shift is to the local government to pick up the services and the expense, and the shaft is to the taxpayer. The local property taxpayer is getting shafted."

Santulli wasn't the only county executive fuming on Friday.

"We understand that the state has a fiscal dilemma, but the solution should not be to shift their costs onto counties and our taxpayers," said Suffolk County Executive Steve Levy, president of the New York State County Executives Association. "If they're having problems and they don't want to raise their own revenues, let them cut back on programs."

Santulli was so steamed on Friday by the prospect of more costs being foisted on local governments that he proposed a statewide rebellion.

"I'm going to start slowing down some of the services that we provide to the state," he said. "If they don't give us the resources to do it, I think that counties across the state need to start standing up to the state of New York."

If the Legislature succeeds in shifting costs, Chemung County would receive \$874,000 less to pay for services the county delivers for the state, Santulli said. It would take a 3.6 percent property tax increase to make up the difference, but it's too late for that because the 2008 county budget is already in place, he said.

He said he is going to ask Steven Hoover, the county director of budget and research, to start working Monday on a contingency plan to offset the potential loss.

"We're going to have to make some serious cuts, possibly in programming, possibly in staff. That is on the table across the state right now," Santulli said during his own news conference held later Friday.

"This is at a time when we're heading to a recession," he said, "when sales taxes could decrease and add to our dilemma."

At issue, Santulli said:

- Counties had split the cost of juvenile detention 50-50 with the state, but they would pick up 100 percent of the cost under changes proposed by former Gov. Eliot Spitzer.
- Counties also would pay 52 percent of social services costs under Spitzer's executive budget. Currently, those costs are split 50-50 with the state. Combined with the shift in juvenile detention expenses, Chemung County would lose \$319,000.

•In response to continued negative economic news, Gov. David Paterson proposed an across-the-board 2 percent cut for every program other than Medicaid. That equates to \$550,000 in lost aid to Chemung County.

Referring to information from the state Business Council, Santulli said New Jersey, Florida and California are cutting spending to deal with their budget deficits, but New York is responding to its deficit by increasing spending by 5 percent, plus adding \$1.3 billion in new taxes and fees.

State Assemblyman Tom O'Mara, R-Horseheads, said he agrees with Santulli, and that the state has not gone far enough to cut its spending.

"While it's been said that the state is tightening its belt, I think there's a lot more room for belt-tightening here at the state and actually cutting spending as opposed to just shifting costs to counties," he said.

O'Mara said he was concerned about potential cost shifting when the Medicaid cap was enacted three years ago to relieve some of the constant growth in the property tax burden.

"There was a concern at that time that at some point, the state would attempt to back-door cost-shifting to the counties in other areas aside from Medicaid," he said. "That appears to be the attempt taking place right now, and I'm certainly in opposition to that."

State Sen. George Winner Jr., R-Elmira, said pushing costs down to local governments and increasing county taxes is not acceptable, especially when taxes are already high.

"Just passing costs onto the county is not really accomplishing a whole lot other than sticking the bill to the real property taxpayer rather than the state of New York," he said.

"We're under the gun to restrain spending and bring this budget in not only on time but at a level less than the governor's, due to the fact that we need to cut back here with this economic uncertainty."

Hoover said he analyzed trends over the past 10 years and concluded that state spending increased 66 percent, the consumer price index rose 26 percent and the county tax levy went up 14 percent. "We're about half the rate of inflation," he said.

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