

Counties warn of tax hikes, cuts in services

Leaders blast plan to reduce state aid, say property levies are already too high

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ALBANY -- The state's county executives see cuts in services followed by higher county property taxes in 2009 as they confront a proposed state budget that reduces their state aid.

"Shift to local government and shaft the taxpayer," Chemung County Executive Tom Santulli termed the state's solution for balancing its 2008-09 budget.

Santulli and other county executives held a bipartisan statewide news conference call sponsored by the New York State County Executives Association on Friday to get out their message about the impact of increasing state mandated expenses combined with decreasing state financial support.

"Instead of tightening their belts at the state level and reducing their spending, they're passing it on to the local level," Rensselaer County Executive Kathleen Jimino said.

Jimino said Rensselaer County could see a loss of \$3 million in anticipated state funding. The county will have to look at where it can save money. She predicted a potential 10 percent increase in county property taxes in 2009.

Albany County Executive Michael Breslin said he's looking at a loss of \$3.5 million to \$4 million in state support. That, Breslin said, equates to a 4 percent to 5 percent tax hike in 2009.

Breslin said the county will have to consider cutting programs that keep the elderly out of more expensive nursing homes and support people in their efforts to get housing.

The reductions, Breslin said, will harm "the people who desperately are going to need more assistance."

While the Legislature and Gov. David Paterson negotiate a new budget, the county executives are upset that shifting costs is crushing their constituents under growing property taxes.

"We're number one for property taxes in the nation," Nassau County Executive Tom Suozzi said.

Westchester County Executive Andrew Spano labeled Wednesday's news conference in Schenectady held by Paterson and Mayor Brian U. Stratton about accepting a 2 percent reduction in state aid as a "charade." He said the cities are still getting a 7 percent increase in aid while the counties are being squeezed financially.

Suffolk County Executive Steve Levy, president of the county executives association, said the executives would take their case to the public and warned that further actions would occur. He wouldn't elaborate on what to expect except to say, "stay tuned."

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