

Towns fear cuts after losing aid

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Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo's proposed \$175.2 billion budget may force some Long Island towns to cut services, dig into reserve funds and possibly eliminate jobs to recoup nearly \$19 million in state aid.

Cuomo's 2019-20 fiscal budget was unveiled last week and disqualified all Suffolk and Nassau towns, and most of their villages, from receiving money from a program called Aid and Incentives for Municipalities.

The governor's decision was a surprise to Long Island town supervisors who were accustomed to receiving the funds annually and included the money in their budgets, adopted in November.

"It's as if he's taking a dagger and aiming it at the heart of municipalities on Long Island," said Brookhaven Town Supervisor Edward P. Romaine, whose \$302 million budget included \$1.8 million in AIM funding for youth programs, recycling education and parks.

Romaine, a Republican, said he was "blindsided" by the governor's decision, which "wipes out all the aid."

Cuomo's administration has said it no longer wants to provide the aid to communities where it covered less than 2 percent of expenditures in 2017 and that such communities did not need the aid.

State: Other aid available

While not directly responding to Romaine's comment or the potential effect on other Long Island municipalities, Morris Peters, a spokesman for the governor's budget division, pointed to a \$20 million grant awarded to Brookhaven to support the town's consolidation plan, which is expected to save taxpayers \$120 million over ten years.

"This grant — which no other local government received — and the associated savings made possible by the grant, exceeds the value of this necessary budget action many, many times over," he said.

Only the villages of Linden-

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hurst, Island Park, Manorhaven, Massapequa Park, South Floral Park and Williston Park will receive the aid, state officials said.

Many Nassau and Suffolk town leaders say they are concerned about how the proposed financial cuts will affect their municipalities.

Hempstead Town, with a population of nearly 800,000, stands to lose \$3.8 million in aid, the most on Long Island.

"Obviously, I'm extremely disappointed the AIM funding has been slashed. Our needs have increased, and the funding had remained flat," Hempstead Town Supervisor Laura Gillen, a Democrat, said.

She noted the funding is used for infrastructure improvements, shared services and economic development. "Our budget anticipated the AIM funding and so now it could put my budget out of whack," Gillen said, adding her town would likely apply for grants to cover the loss.

Town Comptroller Leonard Marchese said Cuomo's budget could force the Southampton to cut jobs or services, borrow the funds or use reserves to make up the difference.

Marchese said the municipality budgeted the state aid at \$190,000 with the money going toward the general fund and equating to two town jobs.

In Albany, governors often make such cuts to lower the bottom line of their budget proposals, knowing the legislature will expend some of its negotiating capital to restore it.

"We're hoping not only will the legislature restore it, but increase it," said Gerry Geist, executive director of the Association of Towns of New York State. "It has been flat for a number of years."

He said that if Cuomo's cuts stick, Long Island town budgets that were completed in the fall will have gaping holes.

"He didn't give us any rationale why, or why he is singling us out," Geist said. "History will show we've been great stewards of public funding."

He said highway repair funding is also too low and roads are in serious need of repair.

No time to prepare

Babylon Supervisor Rich Schaffer, who is also chairman of the Suffolk County Supervisors' Association, said Cuomo's decision didn't allow towns to adequately prepare.

"If they eliminate this program, they need to give us a year to plan first," said Schaffer, who said his association will ask Cuomo to reconsider. Babylon Town budgeted \$1.1 million in state aid.

If the governor's plan is adopted, "we'd have to go into the budget and move things midyear," the supervisor said.

Schaffer said it's too early to determine what town services, if any, may be eliminated, but added Babylon has a "healthy surplus" that he'd rather not touch.

Other Long Island leaders also said more concrete plans won't be made unless Cuomo's proposal is approved.

"We're not at that point because this is only being proposed," Romaine said, adding the state aid normally goes into Brookhaven's general fund for programming and other services. "If this is enacted, we'll have to make some tough decisions."

Geist said under Cuomo's proposal 850 of 933 towns statewide would lose their AIM funding. Officials in the New York State Division of Budget said Cuomo is proposing nearly \$60 million less in total AIM funding than in the current fiscal year.

Town leaders will have to wait to see how the proposal plays out in Albany.

"It's like a baby aspirin headache, it's not like an Excedrin headache," Marchese said.



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WORDS

varado-Ostrow, 41, of Wantagh, said she was glad that museum organizers offered programs celebrating King to the children: "It teaches them that much has been overcome, yet it also teaches them to keep fighting for those who do not have equal rights."

Sara Vernet, museum programs coordinator, discussed fun facts about King that some people may not know.

"He skipped two grades," said Diana Goncalves, 6, of Wantagh.

"Yep, he was so smart he skipped two grades," said Vernet. "He skipped 9th and 12th grades."

Holding up black-and-white photos of public restrooms, swimming pools and theaters, with signs that said "whites only," Vernet told the children that years ago black kids and adults were not allowed to use the same public facilities reserved for white folks.

Vernet asked the children how they would feel if their teachers today separated them based on the color of their skin.

"Sad," said Jacob Rose, 6, of Far Rockaway, Queens.

Children who live in a society that is free from segregation are only just learning about the struggles that came before, said Carmine Goncalves, father of Daniel and Diana.

"You want them to have an appreciation for what Dr. King did and what it meant," said Goncalves.