

Mr. Breslin's final warning

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Our opinion: The Albany County executive objects to an unrealistic budget. Overriding his veto could spell big fiscal trouble.

For weeks, the words most readily attached to Michael Breslin in his position in Albany County government were lame duck. He declined to seek re-election as county executive after 17 years in office, and county finances were increasingly under the control of those who will be in power come January.

On Monday, however, Mr. Breslin was more the incumbent county executive than a lame duck politician, as he vetoed a \$557 million budget for next year. Albany County stands to benefit from his last-minute act of leadership.

County Executive-elect Dan McCoy, now chairman of the legislature, and the other lawmakers should pay serious heed to the warning of a government official with so little on the line. They promise too much and ask taxpayers for too little to pay for it.

A budget Mr. Breslin rejected for its reliance “on unrealistic savings and overly optimistic revenue estimates” should give legislators pause as they consider an override, perhaps tonight.

This is a County Legislature that understandably didn't want to impose the 19 percent property tax increase that Mr. Breslin proposed in the fall. Still, it needs to demonstrate a more acute understanding of how much it's likely to cost to maintain the level of government services to which county residents are accustomed.

The budget that will be in place if Mr. Breslin's veto stands totals \$560.4 million and carries a 12.4 percent tax increase. That's not so appealing, either. But neither is it so unrealistic.

Last month brought the unsettling revelation that too many people in Albany County, in government and out of it, expected their legislators to comply with the state's new 2 percent limit on property tax increases without making substantial reductions in what the county provides.

They want it all — starting with saving the county nursing home. They want services maintained at the county's mental health clinic, the early childhood development program to be preserved, community college tuition subsidies to continue and even uninterrupted road patrols in rural areas.

The budget that the legislature did pass preserves all that — with a relatively low property tax increase of 8 percent. It does so in part by banking on some \$2.2 million more in sales tax revenue than Mr. Breslin's original budget proposal did.

Even Mr. McCoy concedes that Mr. Breslin might well have a legitimate point here. The County Legislature is taking a gamble, Mr. McCoy says, by inflating those revenue estimates based upon encouraging figures from the third quarter.

“It’s kind of like going to Vegas, throwing the dice up in the air and hoping they land the way you want them to land,” he says.

The more sober word from Mr. Breslin’s office is that all that money is unlikely to materialize. He also fears the cuts that the budget does reflect are unworkable. For instance, the county could be precluded from filling some of its more essential jobs in the event of vacancies.

Tonight is perhaps one last time when legislators might listen to him.

The gamble that Mr. McCoy talks about could come back to haunt the county.