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## Collins eyes budget with job cuts, no tax hike

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Taxes would stay flat, but 155 people would face layoffs in January under a \$1.05 billion budget Erie County Executive Chris Collins plans to send to the Legislature today.

Collins told The Buffalo News on Thursday that he has crafted a proposed budget that would cut 308 jobs -- including 153 vacant positions -- mostly in the Department of Social Services.

"There's no property tax increase," he said. "But there's also not any extra money."

Collins, who is running for re-election, signaled in June that he planned to cut 300 jobs next year to further shrink the county payroll.

The county executive said earlier this week that he plans to restore county support to the Buffalo & Erie County Public Library by agreeing to take on the upkeep of library

buildings in Buffalo and dipping into surplus funds.

But Collins is holding steady in other areas that have sparked controversy.

He has proposed the layoffs rather than reduce a "rainy day" fund that has grown larger than the 5 percent -- or about \$52 million -- required under the county charter.

The county surplus, as of January, had grown to roughly \$72 million, largely fueled by unanticipated federal stimulus funds the county received in recent years. County budget officials are forecasting another \$16 million will be left over at the end of this year.

Collins' proposed budget calls for using \$7 million of that surplus to offset two expenses -- a debt payment for the Erie County Medical Center that will drop off after 2012 and a portion of the library subsidy.

"Unlike what some people say, we're not flush with cash," Collins said. "We're comfortable."

County Comptroller Mark C. Poloncarz has accused Collins of "hoarding" stimulus funds rather than spending them on roads and other projects. Poloncarz, a Democrat, is challenging Collins, a Republican, in November's county executive race.

Collins contends that the stimulus funds were meant to stabilize county finances. Without that money, as well as job cuts in recent years, he said he would have had to make even more "drastic changes" to the county budget.

"For those people who want to have spent all of this, I will respectfully, or not even respectfully, disagree," Collins said, "because then we would have a junk bond credit rating. We would not have anything set aside for the next speed bump."

The full proposed 2012 budget was being printed Thursday and was not available for review.

The job cuts would help offset increasing expenses fueled by pension, health care and other rising costs, as well as lower-than-expected growth in property values. County spending would increase by less than 1 percent in the proposed budget.

Collins and Budget Director Gregory G. Gach said the proposal to eliminate 308 positions next year would concentrate on clerical and support positions in the Department of Social Services. Collins believes they are unnecessary as the department has streamlined its intake process.

For example, he said, the department has added scanners that can electronically reproduce documents that used to be shuffled around as paper copies.

"We're automating things that people used to do," he said.

He also will propose adding about 50 new nursing positions at the Erie County

Holding Center for work being done by privately employed nurses. He made a similar proposal earlier this year, but it was not approved by the Legislature.

Collins, who last year tried to eliminated six auditor and two tax collector positions from the Comptroller's Office, said he has put two of those jobs into his proposed budget. The jobs were restored this year through a grant Poloncarz obtained from the Erie County Fiscal Stability Authority.

Collins also will continue a controversial policy of providing county subsidies to only 10 arts and cultural organizations that he has dubbed "regionally significant."

Under Collins' proposal, the property tax rate would remain at \$5.03 for every \$1,000 of assessed value.

The Legislature will spend the next two months reviewing and amending the proposed budget. The final budget will be adopted in December.