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Shakespeare in Delaware Park is one of the cultural agencies that will be frozen out of county support for next year.

Adam Wolffbrandt / News file photo

Library system, not cultural, to get more funds

Legislature Republicans will support Collins' veto of added arts spending

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County Legislature Republicans say they have struck a deal with Chris Collins to restore \$3 million to the library system next year -- rather than the \$4 million he's poised to veto.

In return, the Republicans will back up the county executive after he whips his veto pen across the extra spending that the Legislature -- including its Republicans -- tried to deliver to dozens of arts organizations, such the Irish Classical Theatre, Shakespeare in Delaware Park, the African American Cultural Center and MusicalFare Theatre.

In short, the Republicans will not vote with Democrats to override those vetoes, or any veto for that matter. So if the deal remains intact at 2 p.m. Tuesday, the cultural

agencies will be frozen out of county support for next year and for the foreseeable future, just as Collins left them when he proposed his 2011 budget in October.

Library directors have assured the Republicans that the restored \$3 million -- a one-time event -- will keep operating hours at all branches near this year's hours. That \$3 million is in addition to the \$18 million Collins originally proposed for the library system.

"At this point, any more funding for next year's operations is welcome," Library Director Bridget Quinn-Carey said. "What it lets us do is at least ensure for the next year that people are going to have access to their libraries."

However, the arts groups and their patrons will not be pleased if the deal remains in place. They rallied Friday to push back against the Collins rhetoric. He labeled the advocates "special interest groups" and called their would-be government grants "pork-barrel" spending.

"We're not special interests," said Randall Kramer of MusicalFare Theatre and the Greater Buffalo Cultural Alliance. "We're Buffalonians."

The budget deal

The winners and losers under the GOP deal with County Executive Chris Collins

Restored:

- \$3 million in additional funding for the Buffalo and Erie County libraries

Cut out of funding:

- The African American Cultural Center
- Road Less Traveled Productions
- Irish Classical Theatre
- MusicalFare Theatre
- Lancaster Opera House
- Springville Center for the Arts
- Shakespeare in Delaware Park

All 15 lawmakers, including those in the six-member Republican conference, voted Nov. 30 to give the libraries \$4 million more than Collins proposed for 2011, returning the system to this year's level of operating support -- a total \$22 million from county taxpayers.

Since then, Collins began a full-court press -- with radio ads and robo calls -- to tell taxpayers that the Legislature's additional spending will create a property tax hike if they override his vetoes.

Collins often threatens tax hikes when he has budget scrapes with the Legislature. This year, he has refused to say how steep such a tax hike might be. But Republicans were sounding convinced when explaining why they struck the arrangement.

"Our understanding is that, if we were to take that vote to override the veto of the libraries, the result would be a tax increase," said Legislator Raymond W. Walter, R-Amherst. "All along we have said we are not going to override a veto if that would result in a tax increase."

Walter and Lancaster's Dino J. Fudoli were the only Republican legislators who voted to restore no grants for the nonprofit arts groups next year. The other four Republicans voted to allow grants for select agencies.

Republican Legislator Kevin R. Hardwick of the City of Tonawanda voted to grant money to each of the more than 40 recipients identified in a Democratic-driven restoration plan, raising hopes that he might provide the nine Democrats with the 10th vote needed to thwart vetoes. But Hardwick says he's with the Republicans in their deal with Collins.

"If I thought that we could restore money to the cultural and to the libraries and for a couple of those auditors in the comptroller's office, without forcing a tax increase, I would vote to override in a minute," Hardwick said. "However, I don't think that that's the case. So I'm willing to settle for this \$3 million for the libraries as an alternative."

Collins, who will unveil his "veto message" by Monday, has threatened to kill virtually all of the new spending that lawmakers financed by moving money from other accounts. While a county executive cannot veto a Legislature's spending reductions, Collins is likely to declare "null and void" the Legislature's decision to take \$2.8 million from a multimillion-dollar fund for employee fringe benefits and pour it into other areas.

He's likely to say the Legislature did not cut the number of employees as well, so he cannot honor the use of that \$2.8 million, meaning the extra spending could be covered only with higher property taxes.

However, Comptroller Mark C. Poloncarz's analysis contends that the county routinely budgets more than necessary for employee benefits.

"This appears to be a continuing fiscal gimmick of the administration to hide

revenues behind non-existent expenses, perhaps to avoid funding other areas or to help create an end-of-year surplus," Poloncarz said in a report endorsing the Democrats' budget changes.

Collins views Poloncarz as a potential political rival and cut his staff for 2011 by 36 percent, far deeper than he hit any department run by an elected official. Legislature Democrats restored many of those jobs, including jobs held by the comptroller's internal auditors, whom Collins said were not worth the money. By cutting the auditors, Collins generated protests from Erie County's state-appointed control board.

Still, many of Poloncarz's restored jobs are in line for vetoes. So is the \$400,000 for "Operation Prime Time" summer youth programs that the Legislature restored, 13 jobs across a smattering of departments, and \$1.2 million for an array of cultural agencies, even though the New York Times in 2009 ranked Buffalo as one of the 44 places to visit in the world, in part because of what they offer.

Republicans who wanted to set aside \$20,000 for the Buffalo Naval and Military Park might grant the site some of their personal money, a Republican aide said.

In cutting out grants to most cultural agencies, Collins reasoned that only 10 large entities -- such as the zoo, the Albright-Knox Art Gallery and the Darwin Martin House -- actually draw outside visitors. So to Collins, only those 10 deserve county taxpayer support.

Republicans said that under their agreement with Collins, he will veto the \$4 million that the Legislature gave to the library system. Then he will present paperwork which, if approved by lawmakers, will draw \$3 million from a category of federal stimulus money given Erie County. The money would have been deposited into Erie County's ample rainy day fund.

Here's how Collins' team described the deal with the Republicans: "In order to protect residents against the Democratic majority's proposed tax increase, the county executive will be issuing a series of vetoes to hold the line on spending," spokesman Grant Loomis said.

"Assuming these vetoes are upheld and there is no property tax increase resulting from the Legislature's actions at their next session, the county executive and the Republican caucus will work to pass this supplemental package to transition the library through 2011 without raising property taxes."

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