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Now who knows?

Libraries, cultural and Democrats fare well against county executive

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[2 Comments](#)

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County Executive Chris Collins is obviously not lacking in self-confidence, as he recently set about vetoing extra spending by Legislature Democrats.

At the time, he told a News reporter, "I know what I'm doing ... they don't."

It appears the county executive's Democratic rivals knew what they were doing, too. Through their efforts, they helped to curtail an abomination of proposed budget cuts that would have run a wide swath through departments, culture and art, which provide much-needed public service.

The first sign was a ruling Tuesday by State Supreme Court Justice Joseph R. Glownia that Collins improperly declared the Democrats' spending cuts "null and void" and unworthy of implementation. Of course, Collins promises to appeal.

Meanwhile, others seem to know what they are doing as well, specifically those in the arts community who banded together to thwart the deletion of much of the county's funding.

Collins started by proposing a shocking \$4 million cut to the library system until both he and Legislature Republicans struck a deal to restore \$3 million, on the premise that lawmakers would support his vetoes.

Still, he keeps the \$4 million in library property tax levy, which now turns into \$4 million in county property tax levy each year through 2014. And, because the \$3 million is from federal stimulus aid, it doesn't necessarily return. It's a one-shot and that takes care of only 2011.

Collins also decided that of dozens of county arts venues, only the 10 largest deserved continued funding. They included the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, the Burchfield Penney Art Center, the Buffalo Zoo and the Darwin Martin House, which draw visitors from outside Erie County.

The matter seemed less hopeful as Collins labeled arts groups and their patrons as "special interest groups" and their push for more government grants as "pork barrel" spending.

His funding erasure would have left several organizations off the county books, including the Irish Classical Theatre, Shakespeare in Delaware Park, the African American Cultural Center and MusicalFare Theatre.

If it weren't for the considerable assistance of Robert Gioia and the Oishei Foundation's \$400,000 for the arts community, advocates would still be holding up signs of protest. Collins agreed the county government would contribute \$100,000, from 2010 stimulus money. Republicans announced the agreement for the half million on a deal discussed weeks earlier, but it was the Oishei Foundation that came through with the largest portion.

It looks as if the courts will have to save the comptroller's office from the wrath of Collins, who is determined to maintain a deep cut in staff, at about 36 percent, which threatens much-needed fiscal oversight of county operations.

That the county executive is not a big fan of Comptroller Mark Poloncarz is no secret, but to take it out on the taxpayers is inexcusable. Collins cannot decimate the comptroller's office to shield himself from the scrutiny envisioned by the county charter.

The independently elected comptroller's oversight of county spending plays an integral role in the checks and balances that make democracy work. Part of that role provides the Legislature, also a key component of democracy, honest figures.

As this page has previously observed, Collins' budget cuts would subvert that role.

Collins' arguments in cutting the comptroller's staff are so self-serving that they need to be rejected. We don't like to see the county caught up in the court system. It's costly to taxpayers and many times issues can just as well be handled internally and to the satisfaction of all parties. However, in this case, Poloncarz needs to proceed. A suit he previously filed was dismissed as premature. It's not premature anymore.

This is not about a potential political rival but an office that will be around long after individuals move on to greener pastures.

It's odd to hear Collins proclaiming victory when Democrats got so much of their way, but that's politics. Collins is coming up on an election year and he may ultimately have perceived danger in his assaults on the library and cultural arts. If he should lose next November, the seeds may have been planted in this unhappy, unnecessary episode.

Comments
