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Restore the auditors

Collins should resist temptation to thwart control board's funding

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Erie County's state-appointed control board did the right thing recently by agreeing to spend \$640,000 restoring jobs in the county comptroller's office. They had been whacked by County Executive Chris Collins -- for the fun of it, as best we can tell. Collins and his team should now, without incident, process the paperwork that returns the comptroller's jobs to the county payroll and fight their impulse to muck it up.

The county executive could refuse to process those papers as they travel through the bureaucracy. If he or his minions do so, Collins will again appear petty and small when it comes to Comptroller Mark C. Poloncarz. Blocking the paperwork would amount to an underhanded ploy to thwart the control board's will, and if Collins tries it, the control board's directors should call him out.

Collins doesn't hide his dislike for Poloncarz very well. Usually Collins doesn't even try. He seemed to relish his decision to cut Poloncarz's staff by 36 percent for 2011 -- the deepest cut he threw at any department run by an elected official. The Collins-imposed cuts to the comptroller's auditing staff were especially wrong-headed. They are an affront to the very taxpayers he purports to protect.

The auditors root out waste from inside the government. They provide a check on the county executive and the Legislature. Any government that handles more than \$2 billion a year -- \$1 billion coming in, \$1 billion going out -- benefits from good internal monitors. The outside firm that completes the government's year-end financial report regularly recommends that Erie County maintain a vigorous team of internal auditors. But Collins cut the force reporting to Poloncarz from seven to two. A retirement shrunk it to one -- too few to accomplish anything.

Poloncarz went to court, a proper decision to protect the powers of his office from a frenetic county executive who sees him as a political enemy. He also turned to the control board for some of the money it can dispense to create a more efficient county

government. The control board, seeing Collins' decision for what it was -- small-minded politics -- agreed to pay the salaries and benefits for six auditors and two accountants who go after delinquent tax payments -- restoring roughly half of the 15 jobs that Collins zapped.

When the control board discussed the matter recently, Chairman Daniel C. Oliverio rightly observed that the comptroller's jobs were felled by both Collins and a compliant Legislature. While nine Democrats and four Republicans voted to restore some auditing jobs next year, at least one Republican was needed to override the county executive's predictable veto. But Collins bought off the Republicans by agreeing to direct an extra \$3 million to the libraries, and they toed his line, as usual. At least this time they had something to show for it.

Sometimes Collins can't help himself. That's why it's likely that he might try to undermine those restored jobs for Poloncarz. Collins should instead instruct his employees to process them swiftly and give similar instructions to his Legislature followers as well. The only person who thinks Erie County government doesn't need internal auditors is a county executive who doesn't want auditors looking over his shoulder.

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