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## It's not over yet, as path to a budget vexes county

### Efforts persist today to nail down details

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On their tortuous path to a budget for 2011, Erie County leaders will try to turn a couple of more corners today.

Among them:

- The Legislature is meeting to act on paperwork delivering \$3 million more than the county executive first proposed for the library system. Library directors publicly pleaded Wednesday for county lawmakers to swiftly authorize the money.
- County Comptroller Mark C. Poloncarz is asking the county's state-appointed control board for \$554,000 in "efficiency grants" to conduct some of his mandated duties in 2011 after County Executive Chris Collins stripped away 36 percent of his staff. Poloncarz failed Wednesday to obtain a court order to block the 15 layoffs while his lawsuit against Collins plays out.
- The control board also may discuss the 2011 budget, though the dust has yet to settle. Collins has appealed a separate court case involving \$8.3 million. That ruling will affect, among other things, the return of 16 emergency dispatchers to the payroll Jan. 1 and whether taxpayers see a small tax cut. They won't if Collins wins his appeal.

The continuing spats between Collins and some of the county's other elected leaders—mainly Legislature Democrats and Poloncarz — have turned the latest county budget into another mess. Everyone agrees, however, that there can be no increase in the property tax rate.

Collins' contempt for Poloncarz was on display in State Supreme Court Justice Joseph R. Glownia's courtroom Wednesday. With his 2011 budget, Collins gutted Poloncarz's office but barely nicked offices run by the other elected officials — the

sheriff, district attorney and county clerk. Even the Legislature and the county Board of Elections— staffed by patronage hires — were largely unscathed.

Poloncarz was asking a judge to block the 15 layoffs, which would take effect Dec. 31, until his court case can be decided.

His lawyer, Jerome D. Schad, who is donating his time, said the comptroller cannot carry out his County Charter-imposed duties without those workers. Come Jan. 1, he would have just one internal auditor to find waste, and his ability to go after delinquent revenue would be hamstrung. Schad said Collins will have usurped the comptroller's voter-approved powers simply by choking off his funding.

While Poloncarz's lawyer made his case, Collins' chief of staff, Christopher M. Grant, watched from the gallery. Grant has engineered the Collins team's monthslong assaults on Poloncarz — a potential political rival—and run a candidate against him in 2009.

When the arguments were complete, Glownia denied the motion by Collins' lawyer, H. Todd Bullard, to dismiss the lawsuit. But Glownia also denied the request to halt the layoffs, so those 15 employees would be gone at the start of the budget year unless the control board saves at least some of them with state government money.

The control board has roundly condemned Collins' decision to gut Poloncarz's auditing unit. Control board Chairman Daniel C. Oliverio openly wondered back in October "how you perform audits without auditors." A control board member, Kenneth C. Kruly, first suggested that Poloncarz seek money that the control board can dispense as a way to save expenses over the long term.

Still, Kruly's suggestion back in October drew some dissenters, so it's unclear what the control board will do on that matter today. Poloncarz will ask for a total of \$554,000 to save seven auditors and three employees who help collect overdue revenue. The board's Finance Committee discusses the requests at 1 p. m. and presents its findings to the full control board at 2 in the Central Library.

The Legislature, meanwhile, meets at 2 in Old County Hall to act on the extra \$3 million that Collins is willing to give the library system, to blunt the \$4 million cut he wanted to impose. Legislature Republicans extracted the \$3 million to protect the Collins vetoes that killed all of the Legislature's budget restorations.

Democrats see no need to rush the library funding vote. They would like time to leverage the budget's loose ends into more county support for the libraries and the arts.

Library directors called a news conference Wednesday to say they are likely to activate an austerity plan unless the \$3 million clears all government hurdles by the end of the year.

"If we don't get the money, the plans for the library system are devastating," said Sharon A. Thomas, chairwoman of the Buffalo&Erie County Public Library board of

trustees. "People will lose jobs. We'll be in bad shape."

*News Staff Reporter Henry L. Davis contributed to this report.*

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## Comments

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