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With \$3 million from Erie County, the library system should be able to keep its hours of operation essentially unchanged next year.

Bill Wippert / News file photo

Return to 'hard board' discussed

## Legislators approve money for libraries

### Control board funds six county auditors

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The Erie County Legislature voted Thursday to deliver another \$3 million to run the library system in the coming year, and the state-appointed control board agreed to pay for six auditors who will report to County Comptroller Mark C. Poloncarz.

Both actions patch over funding cracks left by County Executive Chris Collins' budget for the coming year.

Collins had proposed cutting the library subsidy by \$4 million but later agreed to restore \$3 million.

His change of heart, ratified Thursday by the Legislature, sets the county's operating support for the library system at about \$21 million for next year, \$1 million less than

this year.

With \$21 million, library directors expect to keep hours at all branches essentially unchanged and will hold off the full array of austerity measures that would have taken effect if they were forced to make ends meet with the \$18 million Collins first offered.

"I am most grateful that the county's governing body has unanimously agreed to restore \$3 million in funding for the 37-branch library system," said Sharon A. Thomas, the board's chairwoman. "This supplemental funding will allow all communities to meet or exceed New York State minimum standards for minimum weekly open hours in 2011."

Library directors, however, are still in for a lean year because state aid fell in the face of escalating costs.

Collins committed the \$3 million in a one-time deal with Legislature Republicans.

In return for the Republicans' protecting his vetoes of extra spending next year, he would redirect to the libraries \$3 million that he planned to put into the county's rainy day fund. Under the accord, the six Republicans turned away from the votes they cast days earlier to restore all \$4 million.

In recent days, most Democrats continued to press for the \$4 million, which they said they could provide by trimming spending elsewhere. But they lacked the leverage to pull it off, and the final vote went harmoniously, with all 15 lawmakers supporting the extra \$3 million.

Collins also cut Poloncarz's internal auditing staff from seven employees to two because, he argued, the audit team isn't worth the money. With a pending retirement, the team then would dwindle to one.

In October, the control board roundly condemned the move, reasoning that auditors provide a check on spending. Kenneth Kruly, a control board member and county budget director in the 1990s, suggested that Poloncarz request some of the state money the control board can dispense to promote government efficiency.

Poloncarz did just that Thursday, asking for \$554,000 in "efficiency grants" to keep his auditing force at full strength and to retain three employees who help collect delinquent revenue.

Then the board, officially known as the Fiscal Stability Authority, gave him about \$650,000 to pay the salaries and benefits of six auditors, plus two accountants who will help collect delinquent property taxes.

"We are trying to make the best of a bad situation," Kruly said. "The county executive has tried to destroy the comptroller's office. ... It was clearly political."

The nine Democrats in the Legislature had voted with four Republicans to restore

some of the auditing jobs. Those additions, however, also fell victim to the Collins veto pen and his deal with the Republicans.

"Collins decimated the comptroller's office, and the Legislature stood idly by because they couldn't get the votes," said Daniel C. Oliverio, control board chairman. "So the blame lies on both sides."

Poloncarz still will pursue his lawsuit against Collins over the staff cuts. Collins reduced the comptroller's office by 36 percent, far deeper than he hit any other county operation run by an elected official. The lawsuit contends the county executive has tried to usurp the powers of an elected county official.

Control board members nearly decided Thursday to again become a so-called hard control board, able to block financial decisions made by the government's elected leaders. Kruly said the government has built up a surplus only because of federal stimulus money and cannot balance its budgets in coming years without the federal support, or without raising taxes. He called Collins' four-year financial plan a mess.

But Oliverio said the control board should not enter a "control period" without telling Collins and the other budget-makers what they need to do to correct their course, and then devising a plan to impose during a control period.

Oliverio also said that if members did vote to enter a control period, he probably would resign because it made little sense for a hard board to be led by someone who wanted to remain in an advisory phase. The matter was tabled without a formal vote.

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