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## Deal would keep county control board active until 2023

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Some Erie County legislators have proclaimed a healthy dislike for their state-appointed control board.

“Erie County does not need a control board in any capacity, soft or hard,” says Legislator Raymond W. Walter, R-Amherst, on his Facebook page. “The idea that an Albany-appointed authority should supervise anything is ironic.”

He’s not alone among county lawmakers with that sentiment. But the government’s dominant Republican, County Executive Chris Collins, has struck a financial pact with the control board and wants Walter and others to go along.

If they do so today, assorted legislators and county officials would have to abandon hope that the state will dismantle the Erie County Fiscal Stability Authority within the next few years.

The control board would have to exist at least until the year 2023, or until expiration of the 13-year bonds that Collins wants the control board to sell on the government’s behalf.

The bonds will raise more than \$170 million to finance ongoing improvements to roads, bridges, parks and county buildings, including the Buffalo Niagara Convention Center.

Collins, who used to say he would never let the control board close a long-term loan, now says he can’t ignore the potential savings, which the control board pitches as \$21 million over 13 years. Collins says that for this transaction, he will refuse to borrow any other way except through the control board.

So even a determined control board critic like Walter is on the fence.

“I think the savings are overestimated,” he said. “And I think the true cost of a control

board, not just the budgetary cost but the cost of the time and energy that every branch of government spends trying to answer their questions and satisfy the inquiries, I think that is not being factored into this.

“And the soft cost of what it means for the county to be under the influence of a control board has to be factored into this. That being said,” Walter continued, “we cannot go three years, like we did in the past, without capital borrowing.”

Collins sent out a Twitter message an hour before the control board met Feb. 12: “I’m happy to announce we’re letting the control board borrow for capital projects. Right fiscal decision for the taxpayers of Erie County.”

But are those savings for real? Comptroller Mark C. Poloncarz, who would otherwise arrange Erie County’s bond sales, said he counts \$14 million to be saved over 13 years, or about \$1.1 million a year.

Poloncarz, in a letter to the Legislature, said lawmakers should balance those savings against the approximately \$500,000 a year that county taxpayers deliver to run a state control board. He said the control board wants to borrow money to perpetuate itself, on the backs of county taxpayers.

“Ironically, this means that a child born in 2005, the year of the red-green fiscal crisis, [which brought in the control board] would be paying for the mistakes of that crisis as an 18- year-old taxpayer in 2023.”

Then he said: “If you agree future generations should pay for the mistakes of the past, then you should resign from office and let other individuals make the hard decisions we were elected to make.”

Control board Executive Director Kenneth Vetter stood by the analysis that shows \$21 million in savings, not \$14 million.

“We have said there is some play in the margins,” Vetter said, noting the constant fluctuation in interest rates. “But certainly not that kind of play.”

He added: “Even if there is an analysis that shows \$14 million in savings, isn’t \$14 million enough to do this?”

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## Comments

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