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As culturalists await 2011 for county money, GOP connections pay off

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The Erie County Legislature gave an array of cultural organizations and public benefit agencies more money than Chris Collins wanted to give them for 2010.

The county executive refused to parcel out the extra money this year but said he might in 2011, if the county can afford it.

But Collins, a Republican, made an exception for the Erie County Soil and Water Conservation District, which had an advocate in John J. Mills of Orchard Park. Mills leads the Legislature's Republican caucus and is one of two county lawmakers on the soil and water agency's board of directors.

Collins signed a contract that gives the agency the extra \$30,000 the Legislature provided for 2010. The agency already has received the first half of its \$190,000 in county aid.

Many other organizations — museums, galleries, theaters, performing arts troupes — are less fortunate. They must wait until early 2011 to find out if they will receive the Legislature- provided extras.

“If the administration can release the full amount to Soil and Water Conservation, why can’t it do so for the other organizations?” Erie County Comptroller Mark C. Poloncarz asked in his 10-page review of the way Collins has handled requests for county dollars.

Poloncarz sees a basic unfairness. Collins administration officials accuse him of being political.

In amending this year’s budget, the Legislature figured Collins will save more than he estimated by keeping hundreds of county jobs vacant. The Legislature then spread \$1.7 million of those savings — the “turnover savings” — among dozens of cultural organizations and to the Soil and Water Conservation District.

Collins could have vetoed the additions but didn’t. The 12 Democrats in the Legislature last year would have overridden his veto. His team instead sent each recipient a letter.

The Legislature had acted “arbitrarily,” it said, and now it was necessary to “meet the county executive’s primary goal of protecting taxpayers while respecting the budget process.”

So the applicants were told they might collect their extras if those turnover savings materialize. They’ll learn their fate in March 2011, after this year’s financial results are tallied. Informally, they were told not to budget the money.

Except for the Soil and Water district.

Poloncarz said Collins did not veto the Legislature additions because he had another way to retain control — unilaterally delaying the payouts.

“The county executive is simply behaving in a retaliatory manner against organizations when his anger was really directed at the former Legislature majority,” Poloncarz said, lamenting that Collins will succeed unless someone sues him.

Asked to comment, the Collins administration called Poloncarz’s opinion irrelevant.

“Mr. Poloncarz has no role to play in deciding what organizations receive funding or to what extent,” Collins spokesman Grant Loomis said.

As for the exception made for the Soil and Water Conservation District, Loomis said that Collins, upon further review, agreed with the Legislature’s decision to give it more money.

“I called the county executive,” explained Mills, the Republican leader.

Collins had expected the agency to accept the lower amount, \$160,000. Mills told him that with a little more money, the agency could leverage millions in federal aid.

“When I talked to the county executive, he was not aware of the significant impact that the Soil and Water Conservation District has,” Mills said. “He said to me, ‘John, I am glad you called me.’ And he said ‘We are going to reissue the contract with the additional \$30,000.’”

“I sympathize with the cultural, and I think they should be funded because they are part of the economic machine,” Mills added. But he noted that the county Soil and Water Conservation District, headquartered in East Aurora, is not a cultural agency and is not reviewed each year by the county executive’s Cultural Resources Advisory Board.

Collins tightened the process that the advisory board applied under former County Executive Joel A. Giambra. He wants those museums, theaters and galleries to view their county aid as the last dollars in the door, the money they spend to expand their offerings rather than to pay, say, the utility bills. He forced the bigger recipients to make room for his appointees, who would keep watch.

Even though Erie County government now enjoys financial health it hasn’t seen in years, Collins forced this year’s dozens of recipients to accept a contract for the lower amount of aid that he initially recommended, or receive nothing at all — no negotiating allowed.

Poloncarz’s review told the story of the Buffalo and Erie County Botanical Gardens. The county-owned landmark in South Buffalo has been undergoing a multiyear county-assisted renovation. But the board that runs the Gardens was seeking operating aid.

Collins, viewing it as a new applicant, gave nothing. The Legislature provided \$322,000. Collins team sent along a contract it expected the Gardens Society to sign if it wanted to receive the money — in 2011. The society edited the contract, added some clauses, signed it and returned it soon after the new year. As of this week, it still had not heard back from the Collins administration.

Comments

There are no comments on this story.

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