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## Collins asks state comptroller to audit rival Poloncarz's work

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Their spat continues. County Executive Chris Collins and Comptroller Mark C. Poloncarz are writing their own chapter in the Greatest County Hall Feuds, making predecessors Edward J. Rutkowski and Alfreda Slominski look like the Captain and Tennille.

Collins and Poloncarz are not fighting over parking spaces and refrigerators anymore. Of late, Poloncarz has served the Collins camp with subpoenas for records that might fuel a potentially embarrassing report. Team Collins ignored the subpoenas, so Poloncarz will go to court.

In response, the Collins camp has asked State Comptroller Thomas P. DiNapoli to audit the county comptroller's supposedly faulty work.

"Something is going on down there," said Collins' budget director, Gregory G. Gach, who wrote the request to DiNapoli. "I don't know what it is."

Poloncarz said: "I think this is all political and disingenuous. Such is life when you are in Erie County government."

Gach worked for Poloncarz before jumping to the Collins ship. He gave DiNapoli three reasons to unleash his auditors on the Poloncarz crew:

The comptroller doesn't always provide him with the required monthly cash-flow statements that chart whether the government will have cash to pay its bills.

Gach complained that based on a cash-flow statement last year, the county borrowed \$65 million for its annual bridge loan to provide interim financing, but later results showed the county could have borrowed much less. County officials also could have paid their \$21 million state pension fund bill in December 2009 rather than February of this year, when a \$250,000 fee was attached, he said.

In December, the comptroller's office delivered about \$1 million to Erie County Medical Center for space that the county Health Department rents on the hospital campus. Gach said the comptroller's staff should have known the payment was not needed last year. If true, the comptroller's office says it will recover the \$1 million as part of the millions that flow between the government and hospital all the time.

During 2008, Poloncarz refused to pay contractors working on some road and bridge repair projects. Collins that year was fighting the county control board's demand that it borrow the money necessary for major projects. As a result, no bonds were being sold, and the pool of borrowed dollars that usually finances major repairs was emptying fast.

Poloncarz refused to pay certain bills, angering Collins. The county executive believed there was enough money, especially to pay for the long-stalled Tonawanda Creek Road reconstruction in the State Senate district that fellow Republican Michael

H. Ranzenhofer of Amherst wanted to represent. A county contractor sued for payment, winning an extra \$9,200 in interest.

Poloncarz still insists he did the right thing in 2008. He said he was not going to pay contractors with cash he might need to meet the county payroll. As for those other decisions, Gach was briefed on all of them, the comptroller said.

For example, Poloncarz said Gach agreed to borrow \$65 million as a bridge loan last year because it was based on financial conditions at the time. It was designed not with the purpose of making sure that the county had enough cash at the end of 2009, but to ensure that it would have enough cash in February 2010, since February is a lean month.

With state government facing budget shortfalls and slowly reimbursing counties for their welfare spending, Poloncarz said he decided, with Gach agreeing, to pay the pension fund bill in February of this year, as the state allows, with an extra fee.

The state then surprised county leaders by reimbursing the county for the cost of social service programs before the end of 2009, giving Erie County about \$51 million in cash at year's end.

As for those cash-flow statements, Poloncarz's staff said they are provided four times a year and as requested by the county administration and the state-appointed control board.

Will DiNapoli audit the work of the Erie County comptroller? A spokesman said only that the letter is under review.

The Collins-Poloncarz rivalry will probably run at a low boil this year. Next year is an election year for Collins, and Poloncarz remains a potential Democratic opponent.

Collins is now defending himself from federal government complaints that he wanted to place \$28 million in federal stimulus funds into two county reserve accounts.

That's a no-no under the federal rules.

The Collins team suspects Poloncarz put the federal government onto Collins' scent, though Collins outlined his plans in his State of the County speech months ago and Rep. Louise Slaughter, D-Fairport, said she alerted the federal agency involved.

Still, the Collins aides are not happy with Poloncarz and are likely to call him out on the matter in coming weeks.

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## Comments

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