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An unnecessary dispute

Battle over county attorney's pay shouldn't have escalated into court

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Democratic Erie County Comptroller Mark C. Poloncarz did his job in refusing to pay a salary not established by the Legislature or any other legal mechanism.

Yet, the matter is one more battle in the ongoing political feud between Republican Erie County Executive Chris Collins and his soon-to-be opponent, Poloncarz.

In this case, we think the County Legislature touched off a dispute it shouldn't have, but then Poloncarz was right to stand up for taxpayers.

The issue has to do with the salary for the county attorney. Collins set the pay at \$150,000 in the budget he submitted, then watched as the Democratic majority in the County Legislature reduced that to about \$100,000 when it approved the budget. That should have settled the matter. But Collins refused to honor the change.

Collins, who can mildly be described as strong-willed, called it "null and void" based on a technical argument about the Legislature's budget proceedings. He has used that phrase as he refused to implement other decisions of the Legislature.

He maintained that the lower amount is not enough, and he arranged to pay County Attorney Jeremy A. Colby the full \$150,000 a year.

Poloncarz, another strong-willed actor in this drama, refused to pay the higher amount. His name is on the checks, after all, so he instructed his chief auditor to block any payment of the higher salary. He lost that argument when State Supreme Court Justice John L. Michalski ruled recently that Poloncarz had no power to block the bigger paychecks.

The big winner in all this is Collins, who managed an end-run around the Legislature.

Besides Poloncarz, the losers appear to be the county taxpayers, who apparently will end up paying the lawyers on both sides of the arguments. The public is best served by getting good people in key jobs, and it costs money to get good people. It seems reasonable to spend somewhat more than \$100,000 for the county attorney, who is, after all, the chief legal counsel for a \$1 billion entity.

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Poloncarz and the County Legislature did the right thing for taxpayers, but King Collins will not be denied! How dare they limit a salary to only \$100,000. What happened to serving the public and making sacrifices like everyone else is forced to do? I guess the sacrifice is only on our side of the fence. Remember this in November when Collins will brag about running the county like a business. Everyone at the top gets paid and everyone else suffers while still paying their share. Poloncarz doesn't get enough credit for trying to put the brakes on this type of abuse.

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