Ulster County can reduce 2019 tax levy further and still have money left over, Benjamin Center says

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KINGSTON, N.Y. — A former chairman of the Ulster County Legislature says lawmakers could cut the county's property tax levy by an additional $1 million and still have more than $600,000 left over to cover any additional spending.

Gerald Benjamin, of The Benjamin Center For Public Policy at SUNY New Paltz, outlined the center's recommended changes to County Executive Michael Hein's proposed spending plan in a Nov. 15 memo to Legislature Ways and Means Chairman Richard Gerentine.

The Legislature hired The Benjamin Center to review and analyze the executive's spending plan.
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The memo came a week after Benjamin, a former Republican legislator and the body's chairman at a time when the Legislature managed the county government, released a report that called the executive's budget projections for revenues and expenses "prudent" and "within reason" and said that in "a very high-tax environment, Ulster County is aggressively containing property taxes."

The memo apparently was in response to a request by Gerentine, R-Marlborough, for potential line-item changes to Hein's budget.

In his report to the Legislature, Benjamin made a series of recommendations that he said would give lawmakers and taxpayers a better sense of whether they are getting what they are paying for, but he proposed only a single change to the Hein administration's budget projections — a potential increase of between $50,000 and $100,000 in the county's hotel/motel tax receipts.

In his memo, Benjamin said the executive's revenue projections were "conservative estimates" that left room for "adjustment."

He said by adopting his new recommendations, lawmakers could trim $1 million from the amount to be raised by property taxes and still have enough remaining to fund about $620,000 in legislative initiatives.

Hein has proposed a $329 million county budget for next year that calls for a spending increase of $5.1 million, or 1.6 percent, over the $323.8 million county budget adopted for 2018, and a 0.2 percent decrease in the amount to be raised by property taxes.

Benjamin said county lawmakers could increase estimated sales tax revenues by $1.6 million over the $122,435,116 proposed in Hein's budget, and he recommended the legislators increase gaming revenue by $110,000 and the revenue from the county's hotel/motel tax by $75,000.

He also said the lawmakers could assume $567,090 in revenue not included in Hein's plan from the state for the implementation of the countywide shared-services plan.

Benjamin also recommended the county assume the $75,000 charged to municipalities for emergency communications, saying the charge "unnecessarily shifts the burden for these services to municipal governments that are less resourced."

By adopting those recommendations, Benjamin said, "It would be prudent and fair to the taxpayers of Ulster County to reduce the property tax levy by an additional $1 million for 2019."
Benjamin also said the county could save an additional $100,000 in overtime costs in the sheriff's budget by hiring a new corrections officer for $75,000 a year.

He recommended the county increase spending for social services programs that fund day care, child care and special education programs, but he said the increased count cost of those programs would be offset by additional revenues.

Benjamin also recommended lawmakers increase the amount of sales tax revenue shared with municipalities by $226,888 and said the county should include $196,324 to cover the local share of the state's shared-services grant.

"The net result of the adjusted revenue projections and expenditures is a balance of $620,160 to cover any additional expenses that the Legislature may wish to recommend for the 2019 budget," he wrote.

The Legislature's Ways and Means Committee is scheduled to begin its review of the executive's spending plan at 1 p.m. Monday.

In addition to considering Benjamin's recommendations, the committee will consider more than two dozen changes to the budget proposed by lawmakers and the county's other elected officials.

The full Legislature is scheduled to vote on the 2019 county budget at its Dec. 18 meeting.

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Since 1990, Patricia R. Doxsey has been a reporter for the Freeman, covering politics, crime, and government affairs.