

# Ulster County lawmakers hear pitches for added funding in 2019 budget

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KINGSTON, N.Y. — The Ulster County Legislature’s Ways and Means Committee on Monday heard requests from elected officials and county lawmakers for dozens of changes to the proposed 2019 county budget that would add hundreds of thousands of dollars in additional funding for programs, pay raises and new positions.

The requests, known as appeals, were made during a sometimes contentious committee meeting during which lawmakers frequently criticized Hein administration officials attending the meeting, and those officials and legislators exchanged pointed barbs.

Also attending the meeting was former Legislator Gerald Benjamin, who detailed a series of recommendations for changes to County Executive Michael Hein's proposed spending plan. Benjamin, who previously served as the Legislature’s chairman and now heads The Benjamin Center For Public Policy Initiatives at SUNY New Paltz, was hired as a budget consultant by the Legislature.

Among Benjamin’s recommendations are increasing the anticipated sales tax revenue by \$4 million, a roughly 4 percent increase over the 2018 sales tax revenue projections, and cutting the tax levy — the amount generated by county property taxes — by \$1 million.

While he stopped short of saying he would veto any changes to the budget to incorporate those recommendations, Hein called Benjamin's suggestions “reckless.”

“I have great faith in my financial team that has helped lower property taxes to below 2010 levels while delivering more services than ever before,” Hein said.

“I will stand with [my team] and their financial projections over someone who, when they were in the position ... of majority leader or chairman of the Legislature, increased property taxes by 188 percent.

Benjamin was the Republican majority leader of the Legislature from 1986 to 1991 and chairman from 1992 to 1994.

Ulster County Comptroller Elliott Auerbach renewed his request for a confidential secretary for his office, a position that was eliminated in 2017 in a move Auerbach claimed was political. This year, Hein has proposed funding an administrative position for the office.

District Attorney Holley Carnright also appeared before the committee to renew his request for merit pay raises for two assistant district attorneys in his office who he said are woefully underpaid for the work they do and to ask for a paralegal for his office.

“These guys have been waiting for years to get an increase,” Carnright said. But because of the personnel structure established for the District Attorney’s Office, they are unable to get pay raises, he said.

Legislator Lynn Archer, D-Accord, requested funding for two junior legislative fiscal analysts for the Legislature, while other legislators submitted requests for increased funding for a variety of programs, including the Awareness peer-driven substance abuse educational program, the Ulster Performing Arts Center, the Ulster County Community Action Agency and Cornell Cooperative Extension of Ulster County.

Each of the appeals called for the monies to fund the requests to come from the contingency fund included in Hein's proposed budget to cover unanticipated expenses during the coming year.

The committee is expected to hear additional requests Tuesday.