

Consultant and ex-legislator Benjamin finds little to criticize in Ulster County budget proposal

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KINGSTON, N.Y. — The Ulster County Legislature’s budget consultant, himself a former county lawmaker, has found little to criticize in County Executive Michael Hein’s proposed 2019 spending plan. But he did make 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.

In fact, The Benjamin Center, which conducted the analysis for lawmakers, recommended only a single change to the administration’s budget projections — a potential increase of between \$50,000 and \$100,000 in the county’s hotel/motel tax receipts.

In other areas, the executive’s budget projections for revenues and expenses are “prudent” and “within reason,” said Gerald Benjamin, director of The Benjamin Center in New Paltz.

Benjamin, a former county legislator and the body’s chairman who served at a time when the Legislature managed county government, detailed his findings for legislators on Wednesday.

“Everything that I’ve seen here [shows] it is a prudent estimate,” Benjamin said. “In a very high-tax environment, Ulster County is aggressively containing property taxes.”

Hein’s proposed \$329 million budget for next yeat 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 told legislators the line-item format of the budget doesn’t lend itself to an analysis of performance of the county spending plan and “falls short of the [Government Finance Officers Association] best practices.”

“It is long past time for Ulster County to move away from traditional line-item budgeting to performance-based budgeting,” Benjamin said in his report, though he added much of the budget format is proscribed in the County Charter.