

Editorial: Nassau's Risky Cuts

RICHARD STEIER | Posted: Monday, September 10, 2012 5:00 pm

Since taking office in 2010, Nassau County Executive Ed Mangano has taken pride in navigating serious financial problems without having to raise taxes. He has also boasted that the number of employees on the county payroll has dropped to its lowest level in more than half a century.

The other side of those figures, said Nassau Civil Service Employees Association President Jerry Laricchiuta, is that the effect of the job cuts has been to sharply diminish county services, which he said has hurt the quality of life for Nassau residents.

Many of them may not have noticed, however, because most of the cuts, which have included 400 layoffs, have been in areas that would be felt only by poorer people and crime victims. Some of those cuts are nonetheless pretty startling.

As described by Mr. Laricchiuta to this newspaper's Mark Toor, sex offenders' whereabouts are no longer monitored on weekends, and probationers of all kinds who were convicted of felonies can "check in" by sending letters to Probation Officers rather than meeting with them personally. There have been occasions when just a single operator has been available for the county's 911 system. And those seeking social services from the county sometimes endure waits of six hours or more as a result of layoffs, even though a large chunk of those employees' salaries is paid by the state or Federal governments rather than the county.

Mr. Mangano is apparently willing to gamble that grievous crimes won't be committed by unmonitored sex offenders or other probationers, or there won't be a riot in a social-service office by clients frustrated by unreasonable wait times. That's not the smartest management style, however.

It has increasingly been favored by chief executives, many of them Republicans, who are dealing with aid cuts from the Federal Government and believe raising taxes would be politically harmful. We believe that's a misreading of the public mood. Most people understand the tradeoff of paying taxes in return for necessary services. They become frustrated if they believe their tax money is not producing quality services because of wasteful or inefficient practices.

When adequate services become impossible to provide because staff has been cut so severely, conscientious officials will consider a tax hike to prevent greater damage. Residents may grumble about paying too much in taxes, but the failure to provide them a safe place to live where their children can get a quality education is a lot more likely to turn the grumbling into departures.