

Mr. Astorino Goes to Westchester

Slowly but surely, he's turning the tide.

By Patrick Brennan

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What might cause the *New York Times* editorial board to find, in New York's suburban Westchester County, an example of "a struggle for racial integration [that] is neither bygone nor exclusively Southern"? Why might "county leaders [be] stonewalling federal authorities over a longstanding housing desegregation case"?

More or less, a Republican executive in a deep blue district. Over the past two years, county executive Rob Astorino has garnered widespread attention and praise for defending his county against racially tinged federal overreach in a mundane affordable-housing case, while also reducing the onerous costs of county government.

In recent decades, Westchester's wealth has fed a

gargantuan government, which levies the fifth-highest property-tax rates of any county in America — residents pay a staggering 7.8 percent of the median income in property taxes.

New York State also requires a particularly burdensome system of local government — regional government, county legislatures, county executives, and a wide range of county services all weigh down Westchester with a budget of \$1.8 billion.

In 2009, residents decided that their taxes had grown too oppressive and their government too big, and ended a twelve-year Democratic reign in the executive's office. A year after Obama won more than 65 percent of the vote in the county, Republican Rob

Astorino was elected as Westchester's county executive by a margin of 16 points.

Astorino, a successful radio commentator first on ESPN Radio and then with Sirius's Catholic Channel, is a calm but convincing advocate for conservative principles. In an interview in his office with National Review Online, Astorino highlighted the three issues he has emphasized as county executive, which he considers the key roles of local government anywhere: making sure property taxes are reasonable, maintaining essential services, and attracting businesses and economic development.

Astorino's victory in a prominently liberal area garnered him national media attention, but he says that he

wasn't aware of his national profile at all until the morning after his election — when “CNN and the networks were outside my front door, and Rush Limbaugh was talking about me.” Limbaugh cited Astorino as a successful candidate crusading against big government in a “deep blue” region.

Prior to Astorino's election, Westchester had begun a large affordable-housing project with funding from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The previous county executive, Andrew Spano, had settled a 2009 suit by a local anti-discrimination group with the federal government, agreeing that Westchester would build 750 units of housing in predominately white areas, in order to meet its obligation to “affirmatively further fair and affordable housing.”

After Astorino was elected, President Obama's HUD required the county government to submit a document identifying potential “impediments” to the

affordable-housing project, and suggesting actions to overcome them. HUD has repeatedly rejected the county's analysis, despite the fact that the settlement-mandated construction of units is ahead of schedule and compliant with Westchester's agreed-upon settlement.

On May 13, 2011, HUD sent another letter to the county government essentially admitting as much, insisting that Westchester go “beyond the four corners of the settlement” in a few ways. Obama's HUD seemed to be unhappy for two reasons: not enough spending, and not enough government control. First, HUD insisted that more than 50 percent of all homes constructed have three bedrooms, which would more than double the county's costs from \$51.6 million to about \$100 million, a price unreasonable for a county with strained finances. Secondly, HUD has requested that the county sue towns to dismantle their zoning laws on, among other things, multifamily housing, despite the fact that the settlement doesn't require it, and towns have been able to

cooperate in the housing settlement without demolishing their own local laws.

Astorino has insisted that the county will abide by the terms of the original federal settlement, and emphatically rejected HUD's demands as unaffordable outlays and troubling overreach in response to a non-existent problem. Allocating all of the new housing to members of minority groups would increase Westchester's minority population by just 5 percent, while it naturally increased 56 percent from 2000 to 2010, and the county remains ahead of schedule on financing and constructing the housing units. Astorino explained local residents' dismay with what federal authorities “have called . . . their grand experiment” and their issuance of an “integration order.” (Westchester is the fourth most diverse county in the state — tied with New York County, also known as Manhattan.) Astorino has stood fast, however, and told me the national controversy has not distracted him from his county

reforms, which the county government desperately needed.

One almost cannot overstate the tax burden imposed on Westchester residents.

Residents of Fairfield, a similarly affluent county next door in Connecticut, pay half as much property taxes as residents of Westchester.

Astorino notes, “Ninety-nine out of 100 times, when you talk to someone in this county, whether Democrat or Republican, liberal or conservative, it is ‘Stop this tax madness, now.’”

Westchester has a substantial population of senior citizens, and the combination of once rapidly rising property values and a constantly increasing tax levy has made the situation untenable for many. Astorino explained a truly shocking trend: Many Westchester senior citizens now find themselves paying more money in annual property taxes than they did on their home mortgages, and many are exchanging their New York houses for Florida condos as a result.

Property taxes, for better or worse, aren’t like income taxes,

whose incentive effects are not always so tangible. When property taxes reach an unsustainable level, citizens are forced to sell their homes and communities are visibly altered. Moreover, property taxes fall upon residents regardless of their current income. No good comes of high taxes, of course, but there is a silver lining to Westchester’s property-tax rates: By showing citizens the real cost of their government, they have forced liberals and conservatives alike to address government waste.

Despite constantly rising outlays, Astorino has done his best to maintain or reduce Westchester’s tax levy, a marked difference from the constant inflation seen under Democratic executives. (In his first full-year budget, he reduced the total levy by 2 percent, and will hold it steady in his 2012 budget.)

Much of New York’s county-level bloat is due to the number of services, including Medicaid, that New York State provides through county governments.

But the government is essentially redundant in other respects, as indicated by a

couple of the budget reforms he highlights.

Westchester’s twelve county homeless shelters were operating well under capacity, thanks to notably successful efforts in relocating homeless citizens to permanent housing. In fact, two shelters were running only about 50 percent full on the average night — but costing the county as if they were filled by homeless every night. Sensibly, Astorino decided to close these two shelters, saving a significant amount of money while leaving the system with plenty of remaining capacity. He noted that, because it involved layoffs, even such an obvious fix was lambasted: “The narrative from the other side was, we’re throwing homeless people out in the street.”

Another of Astorino’s reforms was similarly demonized. The county government was administering Section 8 housing vouchers on behalf of the state, losing about \$700,000 a year over and above state reimbursements, when they could have contracted it to the state. Seeing an opportunity, Astorino cancelled the contract

— state employees now provide the same Section 8 services at no loss to the county, and work in the same county office building, for which the state pays the county \$237,000 a year in rent. But even this seemingly obvious solution, which saves the county almost \$1 million a year, was heavily opposed. Siding with the public-sector union involved, the Democratic county legislature insisted unsuccessfully that the government rehire the county workers for what Astorino calls “no-show jobs,” since the state now provided the service.

Astorino’s profile has not diminished — after unveiling his 2012 county budget in November, he was featured on Fox Business Network to explain why union members’ refusal to contribute to their own health-care costs forced 210 layoffs in his 2012 county budget. His combination of personal appeal and policy knowledge seem to suggest great political potential, but when I prompted him about future ambitions, he smiled and demurred, emphasizing his long-term commitment to reform in Westchester. In fact,

he appreciates the challenge and opportunity Westchester represents, noting that “there’s a lot at stake, there are a lot of smart people in this county, and they understand what we’re doing.”

He attributes his vigorous approach to government reform to his concern for the problems of his home county, and to his wider beliefs about the proper function of government: “The county is tangled with the state,” but Westchester, as a large county, can be “a model, a laboratory for the rest of the state and the federal government. If we can do it in Westchester, it can be done elsewhere.”

Indeed, sentiment in the county about Astorino’s performance, despite controversy and austerity, seems to be quite positive: The most obvious vindication of Westchester’s new government was November’s county-legislature election. In three excruciatingly close races, the Republicans managed to pick up two seats, breaking the veto-overriding Democratic supermajority and securing both a political

mandate and a practical way forward for reform.

Rob Astorino’s success in Westchester County is due in no small part to unique factors: his charisma and command of the issues, and taxpayers who have emphatically rejected onerous taxes. But as counties and municipalities across America must confront worsening fiscal situations, Astorino has shown that successes are possible anywhere, even Westchester, with smart reforms and political will. Astorino, *agonistes* no longer, has crusaded for small government, and won more converts than anyone would have expected.