



Questions remain after Cuomo vetoes advance notice for retiree health plan changes

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ALBANY – The 200,000 retired local public employees in New York would like a little advance notice whenever their health plans are changed.

Legislation requiring local governments to give 30 days’ notices ahead of “substantive” changes was struck down by an end-of-year veto from Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, who has repeatedly opposed similar measures.

The notification issue has become more pressing in recent years due to steadily rising health care costs, which are leading municipalities to adopt stripped-down health plans for retirees. A year ago, the city of Schenectady contemplated making changes that would have driven up insurance costs for city retirees.

Ed Farrell, executive director of the Retired Public Employees Association, said retirees want a heads-up about potential changes so they can have input in the process and make informed decisions about their health insurance – including the option of leaving the plans offered by the government.

In 2016, Cuomo vetoed a bill pushed by the association that would have required 90 days’ notice before changes. His veto message argued that “90 days’ notice is simply not possible given the fluidity of negotiations and the need to make quick decisions.”

The next year, the legislation reduced the time period to 45 days – but drew another veto. Cuomo’s 2017 rejection lumped the bill in with 11 so-called “pension sweeteners” that would have added additional retirement or health care benefits, even though the legislation only called for notification.

The most recent veto message once again claimed the bill would automatically add to the fiscal stress felt by municipalities. Farrell called that argument “somewhat misleading.”

“This is not a pension sweetener. ... This is nothing to do with that,” he said.

“We’re just bewildered,” Farrell said. “All this is is a notification requirement. It’s certainly not onerous for a local government.”

Asked about the rationale for opposing the bill, Cuomo’s office declined to comment beyond referring to the recent veto message.

Based on the overwhelming support in the Legislature for this effort, it’s likely an amended version of the bill could wind up on the governor’s desk again this year, but

Farrell said his organization hasn’t discussed its legislative options yet.

It’s not clear if the retirees’ association will propose reducing the notification window and further, as he felt the 30-day warning was reasonable.