EDITORIAL: Ulster County comptroller's job is to protect the taxpayers

Sunday, October 7, 2012

ULSTER County Sheriff Paul Van Blarcum ought to reconsider his intemperate response to a little oversight.

It started with a preliminary report by county Comptroller Elliott Auerbach, who warned of concerns about a proposed memorandum of understanding for operating the Ulster Regional Gang Enforcement Narcotics Team, colloquially known simply as URGENT.

Auerbach said the proposed memorandum might be unenforceable and maybe the county Legislature should have some attorneys take a closer look. He later said he was freezing about $200,000 in assets seized by URGENT pending a satisfactory agreement.

It’s a tangled web, but, in short, the previous agreement was never executed, the comptroller reported. None of the seized assets, including cash, were distributed despite the original intention of apportioning 45 percent of the assets among the participating municipalities.

Why? Because the cops decided among themselves to plow the assets back into URGENT, the comptroller concluded.

FURTHER, the comptroller has reported that URGENT’s record-keeping has been so untidy that it is difficult to account for the flow of assets.

That’s a big, fat problem, in part because URGENT has a history.

For one thing, there is former Lt. Timothy Matthews, late of URGENT and the Kingston Police Department, now serving a prison term of 3 to 9 years for grand larceny.

Matthews, who headed URGENT, admitted stealing at least $50,000 from the county, as well as
$50,000 from the city.

It was not local authorities who discovered something amiss. It was the state comptroller who discovered a problem while auditing the books within the Kingston school district, where Matthews was double-dipping.

This is important on a couple of scores.

First, three local governmental entities were getting ripped off and were none the wiser, including from within the umbrellas of URGENT and the Kingston Police Department.

Second, it took an outside agency, a comptroller, to blow the whistle.

It’s also of some significance that, even after the whistle was blown, there was a noticeable lack of vigor in investigating and prosecuting the case.

The instant impulse of local officialdom after the scandal broke was to paint the problem as that of “one bad cop.” Neither Matthews nor anyone else was held accountable for allegedly ripping off the taxpayers of the school district, despite evidence of collusion to make illegal overpayments.

THERE is no reason for anyone to believe that complicated issues involving the accounting of seized assets and their distribution among multiple jurisdictions will just magically take care of themselves. History says they don’t.

The issue is not that Van Blarcum answers to the county comptroller. He doesn’t. Both Van Blarcum and Auerbach are elected county officials, serving exactly the same constituency, which consists of the citizens of Ulster County.

It is, however, very much the job of the county comptroller to keep an eye over pocketbook issues involving the taxpayers. So, when the county comptroller raises an issue about a contract, be it the contract of URGENT or any other involving the county, he does so on behalf of the people.

THEREFORE, when the sheriff dismisses those concerns as however many “pages of BS” or by curtly saying that he and other cops “came up with a plan” and “that plan does not and will not include the county comptroller,” it is not really the county comptroller he is turning his back on. It is the citizenry of Ulster County.

When Van Blarcum accuses Auerbach of “screwing the citizens” by freezing the assets of URGENT, he has it exactly wrong. In the end, the comptroller may be wrong or right about the legality of the proposed memorandum, but the impulse to get it right to protect taxpayers is unimpeachable.

Closer scrutiny of this multi-jurisdictional policing task force with the power to seize and distribute property (or not) is what is really urgent.