

Levy, Suozzi press for preschool aid

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ALBANY — Long Island's two county executives joined others here Friday in urging the state to assume the full cost of preschool programs for disabled children, which threaten to hike property taxes next year because of a slowdown in sales-tax collections and other revenue.

Suffolk County Executive Steve Levy described the price tag for preschool special ed as "a beast," growing 6 percent to 12 percent per year, far above the inflation rate. That translates into more than \$100 million this year

in Suffolk and \$107 million in Nassau.

Levy, who was elected president of the state County Executives Association on Friday, said Albany should take on the 40.5 percent of preschool expenses that it doesn't already pay. "We have to pay a fortune for this program, yet we have . . . no say in how it is run," he said.

Levy's comments came during a news conference with about a dozen other county executives, including Nassau's Thomas Suozzi. The show of solidarity ended, however, when a Newsday reporter asked if the association would adopt Levy's strong opposition to illegal immi-

gration. As Levy answered, some leaders left the room while others backed away from him.

Levy joked, "Boy, you mention immigration and you see what happens around here."

Then Andrew Spano of Westchester interrupted, saying, "We have differing opinions on this."

Still, Levy was elected unanimously despite past criticism of his attempts to crack down on businesses that employ undocumented immigrants and on landlords who house them.

Back on the preschool issue, officials said the program for disabled kids costs about \$1 billion per year, with the counties'

portion totaling \$400 million. The bill has soared as enrollment swelled from 18,000 students statewide in 1989 to 80,400 in 2005-06.

Last month, a task force appointed by Gov. Eliot Spitzer suggested nine improvements, including a cap on county costs with any future increases borne by the state or school districts, or both. Only three states require county money for preschool special ed.

The counties' push to get New York State to assume more of the costs comes as Spitzer and lawmakers face a \$4.3-billion deficit in 2008-09.

Budget division spokesman

Jeffrey Gordon said the Spitzer administration "recognizes that county governments face growing fiscal pressures and will continue to review and evaluate their recommendations."

Past budget crunches nixed plans to end county payments for preschool special ed.

The county executives also want help from Albany to further curb Medicaid spending and property taxes.

As for illegal immigration, Levy said the county executives planned to lobby the state's congressional delegation for "reimbursement" of increased education, health care and police costs.