

Ulster to reappraise possible changes to senior meals program

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KINGSTON — Legislative opposition has prompted Ulster County officials to reappraise a plan to replace the hot meals delivered daily to homebound senior citizens with frozen meals delivered weekly.

The move to weekly deliveries was to begin in January.

Deputy County Executive Robert Sudlow said Thursday that legislative “pushback” to the proposal prompted the decision to abandon the planned timetable for implementation so the project can be reappraised.

A number of legislators voiced concerns about the loss of daily contact with seniors that the change would cause, he said

Sudlow said the administration of County Executive Michael Hein will spend the next three months answering questions that have been raised about the Meals on Wheels program, including the potential impact of the proposed shift to less frequent deliveries of microwavable meals.

Sudlow said the decision to switch from hot meals delivered daily to frozen meals delivered weekly was driven, in large part, by program costs and demand. Meals on Wheels is a state- and federally funded program. For 2010, Ulster County received \$1.03 million, but the program saw a \$125,000 shortfall, which the county had to make up.

Meals on Wheels provides meals to 488 senior citizens in Ulster County. Another 72 people are on a waiting list.

“We have a waiting list for home-delivered meals, which we haven’t had before, and funding is basically flat,” Sudlow said.

“The goal with the change to frozen meals was to eliminate the waiting list,” he said. “We want to make sure we serve this critical population.”

Sudlow said it costs less to produce frozen meals than hot meals.

He said the county has decided to eliminate the waiting list, in part, by reducing the number of days the congregate meal sites in Kingston, Saugerties, New Paltz and Ellenville are open. He said the number of seniors eating at those sites has dropped dramatically.

The seniors on the waiting list have been interviewed, he said, and all will begin receiving frozen meals.

Sudlow said the Hein administration will study the program over the next three months and meet with the county Legislature's Health and Human Services Committee to determine how to best provide the service going forward.