

DuPage tax supporters ready for month-long blitz

By Jake Griffin | Daily Herald Staff

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Getting a countywide sales tax increase passed may not be the long shot some DuPage County officials believe if all voters are like Billie Stiltner, Richard Palicka Sr. and Marilyn Blaszczyk.

The 67-year-old Stiltner doesn't support the proposed increase, but isn't going out of his way to fight it.

"We pay enough taxes and things now already," the Carol Stream resident said. "No, it will not make me go vote, though."

Palicka said he has been following the county's financial plight and will vote for the increase.

"You gotta trust your elected leaders and if they need the money, we should vote for it," the Lisle resident said. "It's an easier tax, too. A sales tax is a tax on everybody, even if you don't live here."

And Blaszczyk is a fresh canvas who wants to learn as much as possible before casting her ballot on the Feb. 5 referendum ballot proposal.

"This is the first time I've heard about it," the Wood Dale library volunteer said. "I will be much more interested in the vote now and trying to find out what this is all about."

As county leaders gear up for a monthlong informational blitz on the quarter-percentage point sales tax increase request, all three reactions are good news.

"In a nutshell, that hits it on the head," county board Chairman Robert Schillerstrom said. "My belief is that the people of DuPage County are smart people who use their money wisely and if they understand the issue, this is something they've got to be supportive of."

While in the works for months, the major push for voter support began Friday as county leaders announced former Illinois Attorney General and DuPage County State's Attorney Jim Ryan would lead the campaign to pass the referendum proposal that could generate \$40 million annually and help stave off roughly 240 public safety job cuts.

Currently, the county's sales tax rate is 6.75 percent. It would jump to 7 percent if the referendum request is approved. The tax rate increase would cover sales of all goods except groceries and prescription drugs, to lessen the impact on senior citizens and lower income taxpayers, supporters said.

The doomsday scenario calls for dozens of sheriff's office and courthouse jobs to be cut if the tax request fails.

Opponents say county officials are using scare tactics to pass the increase and the money could be found in other county departments to save public safety jobs.

"The reason people come to DuPage is for good schools and low crime," Ryan said. "And we want to keep it that way."

Education and donation is the name of the game now. Ryan will enlist Schillerstrom, along with Sheriff John Zaruba, State's Attorney Joseph Birkett and Circuit Court Clerk Chris Kachiroubas to help stump for the increase. They're already reaching into their campaign war chests to help out.

"I put in the first \$10,000 and then I think Joe Birkett put in another \$10,000," Schillerstrom said. "I think the sheriff

is going to contribute \$10,000 and Kachiroubas is going over what he can afford. And I managed to get the bar association to contribute another \$10,000."

It's unclear how much in total already has been raised to support the push. The state election board's Web site only lists the recent formation of the "Coalition for a Safe DuPage" as a fundraising body. It does not detail what's in its coffers.

But campaign officials aren't close to being done looking for quick infusions of cash to keep the education process going.

"We expect this to cost \$100,000 to \$300,000 to run a successful campaign," said Dan Curry, a political consultant working on the recently dubbed "Stay Safe DuPage" referendum campaign. "We've got some seed money from the campaign funds of various public officials."

Kachiroubas was surprised to see the dollar amount attached to the campaign.

"Wow," he said. "I'll give what I can, but I'm facing an election in November, too, and I want to maintain my office."

As for timing, Ryan and his team have less than 30 days to rally support for a tax increase at a time when holiday shopping bills are showing up in voters' mailboxes.

Curry said a Web site will soon be activated that will act as the hub for most information and donation needs.

Birkett said a month is plenty of time to educate a county with a population larger than seven states.

"If you're not willing to put in the effort, you don't belong in the game," he said. "I think we have a very good shot at winning this thing. With all campaigns, everything happens in the last month or so."