

Bailout could render referendum moot

By Jake Griffin | Daily Herald Staff

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It's possible that in less than a month DuPage County's budget deficit could become a surplus.

If the state's mass transit bailout proposal goes through in its current form, county coffers won't need the quarter percentage point sales tax hike voters are being asked to approve on the Feb. 5 ballot.

The state plan calls for Chicago's collar counties serviced by the Regional Transportation Authority to increase their sales tax rates by a quarter percentage point to pay for transit services.

Those counties would also increase the sales tax another quarter point to fund other transportation initiatives or public safety issues. This extra increase came at the behest of DuPage County Board Chairman Robert Schillerstrom.

These increases would automatically go into effect if the state legislature approves an amendment being added by Gov. Rod Blagojevich allowing senior citizens to ride free throughout the mass transit system. Neither the public nor county officials will vote on the increase.

Meanwhile, DuPage County voters are being asked to support another quarter percentage point sales tax hike to stave off roughly 240 public safety job cuts. The increase is expected to generate roughly \$40 million a year.

"At this point, my position is we continue to move forward with the referendum until we know that the legislature approves," Schillerstrom said. "Once we get to the point where we know this is a done deal and we begin to collect the tax, then it would be appropriate to make some type of statement urging people to vote against the referendum."

That's because the extra quarter point increase included in the state transit bailout could accomplish what the ballot initiative would do. So it's possible DuPage County's sales tax rate could increase by three-quarters of a percentage point after Feb. 5 and the county would have a surplus upwards of \$40 million.

"All these problems with potentially too much money are not really likely," Schillerstrom said. "But what a terrible problem to have."

Many county board members refused comment on the developments, worried the county may still need the voter-approved tax hike if the state's proposal falls apart.

"Any time you can allow the people to be heard, that's a good thing," District 2 board member Jeff Redick said.