

DuPage funding woes may be near end

County would use sales-tax hike for public-safety needs

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After two years of pleading with state legislators to help fix their financial crisis -- and about a month before layoffs were expected to begin -- DuPage County leaders are hoping they got a reprieve Thursday in the form of a transportation funding bill.

If it wins final approval, the legislation will raise the sales tax in Cook County and the collar counties a quarter-cent to pay for mass transit in the Chicago area and another quarter-cent in the collar counties to be used for transportation projects or public safety. DuPage County Board Chairman Robert Schillerstrom pushed for the public-safety option, and that concession was granted by the General Assembly.

If it gets the increase, cash-strapped DuPage apparently will be able to rescind cutting 240 county jobs, many of which were in public safety and health services. The legislation also would seem to make moot a measure on the Feb. 5 ballot asking DuPage voters to pass a county tax increase to fund public safety.

The bill still faces potentially significant procedural hurdles, but Schillerstrom said Thursday that he is confident it will become law before layoffs would take effect in mid-February.

"Some collar counties really need substantial money for transportation purposes," Schillerstrom said. "DuPage County's greatest need at this point is for public safety."

County officials have estimated that a quarter-cent sales-tax increase would raise about \$40 million per year and would be enough to roll back all or most of the planned cutbacks.

In materials distributed about the referendum measure, the county said the proposed tax increase would cost the average DuPage household about \$80 a year. That burden would increase under the bill passed Thursday.

After the bill passed, Gov. Rod Blagojevich said he would not go along with it until lawmakers agreed to provide free bus and train rides for senior citizens. That provision must go back to both houses for approval in a special session that may be scheduled for next week.

DuPage has been facing budget deficits for the last few years, forcing Schillerstrom to go to Springfield to explain

the county's situation. Last year, DuPage leaders hoped the legislature would allow them to impose a county cigarette tax that could bail them out, but that did not happen.

"This time our situation resonated with the legislature," Schillerstrom said.

Republican Sens. Dan Cronin, John Millner and Kirk Dillard, whose districts include parts of DuPage, voted for the bill. Sen. Carole Pankau, a Republican who represents the northeastern part of DuPage, voted against it, explaining that she believes the bill contains more costs than benefits for her district.

Millner, a former police chief in Elmhurst, said the vote for the transportation bill with the tax increase was easy for him.

"How could you say no to the county's public-safety needs? Knowing what I know about public safety, it would have been irresponsible of me to vote against it," Millner said.

After numerous discussions and other possible bailout scenarios were dismissed, County Board members decided to put the referendum measure to raise the sales tax by a quarter-cent on the ballot. Schillerstrom said Thursday that if the transportation bill is implemented, he would issue a statement saying voters can ignore the ballot question.

The 2008 budget provides for \$375.9 million in spending, about \$52 million less than in 2007.

Schillerstrom and finance officials have said that with expenses increasing and revenue remaining stable, there was no alternative to cutting staff. Hardest hit were to be the agencies related to law enforcement.

Planned cuts included 104 positions in the Sheriff's Department, three in the state's attorney's office, 29 in the probation department and 18 in the court clerk's office. It also includes cuts in breast-cancer and emergency dental-care programs and staff at the county convalescent center.

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