

Transit bill could halt tax hike

January 11, 2008

By Paige Winfield Staff Writer

DuPage County can terminate its campaign for a countywide sales tax increase if a state transit bill ever makes it through Springfield, including the governor's signature.

On Thursday, the General Assembly passed a CTA funding bill that would raise taxes by a quarter-cent in Cook County and a half-cent in the five collar counties, including DuPage. The bill would allow the suburban collar counties to use a portion of their sales-tax increase to fund public safety and transportation.

But the bill will have to be approved again by both bodies. Gov. Rod Blagojevich vetoed the latest version to insisting it include free train and bus rides for the state's senior citizens. If the bill is ever successful, DuPage would receive the public safety funding the county needs and could halt the referendum campaign, State's Attorney Joe Birkett said.

"Upon that happening I think the campaign would fold up," he said. "The county would not have to implement that tax because now it could be done by legislation."

But until that happens, the referendum committee is moving full-speed ahead, Birkett said.

Timeline to budget crisis

January 2006 Chairman Robert Schillerstrom creates Financial Forecast committee to look at the county's short- and long-term revenue picture.

August 2006 Committee reports that a new revenue sources must be found - probably through a cigarette tax or sales tax - or the county will face 20 percent cuts in 2008.

November 2006 Schillerstrom urges the Illinois legislature to pass a provision allowing counties to levy a cigarette tax, but the provision only passes in the House. On Nov. 30, the County Board cuts the 2007 budget to \$137.9 - slightly below the \$141.2 million 2006 budget and \$21 million below department funding requests.

February 2007 As leaders in Springfield continue to ignore the county's pleas for a cigarette tax, board members consider placing a public-safety sales tax referendum on the April ballot. They decide against it after concluding there is not enough time before the election to launch a successful campaign.

June 2007 The 65 position reductions mandated by the 2007 budget have occurred - half through layoffs and half through attrition across almost every department, including the Convalescent Center, circuit clerk, county sheriff and state's attorney.

September 2007 Still hoping for a cigarette tax, Schillerstrom delays his 2008 budget presentation until October. The finance department reports that county funding will decrease by \$10 million in 2008, with the end of a series of five \$15 million payments from the Water Commission. It is projected that revenues will not attain 2007 levels until 2012.

October 2007 With no cigarette tax in sight, Schillerstrom proposes a 2008 budget that slashes \$10 million and calls for 235 layoffs. Officials in public safety and human services protest, saying the cuts are unacceptable.

November 2007 The board decides to pursue the later of two revenue options: a vehicle sticker tax and a public safety sales tax. They approve Schillerstrom's budget but postpone cuts until after the Feb. 5 primary, when voters will either reject or accept a quarter-cent sales tax.

January 2008 A campaign for the referendum is launched by a committee headed by former Illinois Attorney General Jim Ryan.