

Officials rally for tax referendum

Public safety agencies hope for relief from cuts

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By Paige Winfield Staff Writer

A proposed sales tax increase would pull about five more dollars from your pocket each month if you are an average consumer in DuPage County.

But that estimate is a small price to pay for saving the county's public safety agencies from steep budget cuts and layoffs, say county officials who are working to convince voters to approve a quarter-cent sales tax increase in the Feb. 5 primary.

"We have been cut to the bone," said State's Attorney Joe Birkett, who emphasizes that he is operating his office with fewer prosecutors per capita than any other county in Illinois. "We can no longer function and provide the services that DuPage County residents expect."

Birkett and Robert Schillerstrom, DuPage County Board chairman, are leading the campaign for the referendum with a committee headed by former Illinois Attorney General Jim Ryan.

With less than a month before the primary, they admit time is short. But Schillerstrom hopes mailings, cable ads, yard signs and a Web site (www.staysafedupage.com) will do the trick.

Resurrecting tax plan

The referendum - which would raise the sales tax from 6.75 percent to 7 percent - was almost placed on the ballot last April, as County Board members looked ahead to sizable funding shortfalls in the 2008 budget. But the plan died in February last year when state legislators advised that two months was not enough time to successfully campaign for something as unpopular as a tax hike.

The referendum idea was resurrected in November, as County Board members faced cutting the budget by \$10 million and laying off 235 county employees. They voted to place the sales tax on the ballot in February and postponed cuts until after the election.

With approval, the referendum would open up a new stream of \$40 million annually for the county sheriff, state's attorney, courts, probation department, circuit clerk, DUI evaluation, emergency management and coroner. Those departments then would transfer funding to save from extinction some Health Department services.

Groceries and prescription drugs would be exempted from the tax rate increase to reduce the impact on senior citizens and lower income taxpayers, Birkett said.

Pro bono

County officials emphasize the tax hike equals only \$1 per \$400 purchase.

That's the message on 40,000 friend-to-friend cards that were printed for free by two friends of Birkett.

Alan and Sharon Jania, owners of Aurora-based Diamond Envelope Corporation, have donated campaign materials to Birkett since he handled a 1992 robbery case for their son, Alan W. Jania. Alan W. Jania was attacked by two males who stole a car he had been trying to sell.

Saving the county about \$1,000 by printing the cards, Jania said he agrees wholeheartedly with its message and hopes other local businesses will, too.

"I think people are willing and supportive of those kinds of increases when they see the justification of the services that are going to be rendered," he said.

Strapped for time

The same shortage that halted the sales tax last February afflicts the campaign now: a lack of time. Most referendum campaigns are started six months in advance of an election, said Dan Curry, former press secretary for Jim Ryan and now a political consultant for the referendum committee. Ryan is chairman.

"This campaign really only got started in earnest a couple weeks before Christmas, so it's really a compressed time to get all the pieces together," Curry said.

Curry estimates a successful campaign will cost \$100,000 to \$300,000. While it's unclear how much money has been raised so far, Schillerstrom, Birkett and the DuPage Bar Association each have donated \$10,000, he said.

Support also has been pledged by some labor groups and organizations, including Mothers Against Drunk Driving, Naperville Crime Stoppers and the DuPage and Illinois Crime Commissions. The grassroots campaign is depending heavily on public safety officials advocating for the referendum throughout DuPage, Curry said.

"We're going to have all the top people fan out across the community," he said.

Jim Healy, a County Board member representing Naperville and Lisle, supports the tax but has expressed skepticism that voters can be persuaded in only two months. He also says the presidential races are generating great interest in the primary, which bodes well for the referendum.

"With that many people coming out, it could have a much better chance," Healy said. "I'm still not convinced that it will pass, but I have much higher hopes for it during the time period."

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