

Area legislators say sales tax bypasses voters

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By MEG DEDOLPH Staff writer

Area legislators are criticizing two amendments to the bill that proposes to bail out Chicago-area mass transit agencies - including one they say was done largely at the request of DuPage County Board Chairman Bob Schillerstrom.

In response, Schillerstrom says he is acting responsibly in looking for different ways to find money to pay for public safety services in the county.

The CTA funding bill approved Thursday by the General Assembly raises the state sales tax by a half-cent per dollar in the five collar counties, including DuPage and Will, and a quarter-cent per dollar in Cook County.

One amendment would allow the suburban counties to use part of the half-cent sales tax increase in the bill to pay for public safety as well as transportation.

However, DuPage County officials also are campaigning for a referendum that calls for a quarter-cent sales tax increase to be used to pay for public safety. This referendum is on the Feb. 5 ballot.

Speaking at a Naperville Area Chamber of Commerce Legislative Committee meeting Monday, state Rep. Joe Dunn, R-Naperville, said this proposal was "truly (Schillerstrom's) language."

"None of us heard of that until the day we voted for it," Dunn said.

Hultgren opposes

Dunn said he objected to the amendment because voters should be able to decide on such issues as paying for public safety.

"I've really found it offensive to go around the referendum process, to go around the voter, when the ballots have already been printed, they're at city hall," he said. "I believe it's wrong for Springfield to bypass it."

State Sen. Randy Hultgren, R-Wheaton, said he also opposed the transit package because it has no money for capital projects, and that he agreed with Dunn about the apportionment of sales tax.

"It seemed very disingenuous to try to sneak it through, and then come back and say, 'Don't vote for (the referendum.)'"

But Schillerstrom disagreed.

"I've been in Springfield for almost three years looking for a revenue source for the county and asking the Legislature for help," he said. "We desperately need public safety money ... this definitely has an impact on our quality of life."

Impact of cuts

Without some kind of public safety funding, Schillerstrom says the county will have to lay off sheriff's deputies, assistant state's attorneys and probation officers.

"Any time you want to solve a problem, you come at it from multiple approaches, trying to find a method to solve the problem," he said. "If we fail, we're going to lay off 100 police officers, and that's a substantial problem. I don't think we can take the chance to do that."

He said it would have been "highly irresponsible" to turn down assistance from the Legislature in favor of waiting to see whether voters passed a referendum.

If the Legislature approves the transit bill as amended, Schillerstrom said the county would stop promoting its public safety referendum.

"The County Board won't implement it, or we'll send out something as soon as the state finally

passes this thing urging people not to vote for it," he said.

The other amendment, proposed by Gov. Rod Blagojevich, is a provision allowing people 65 and older to ride mass transit for free. The governor has said he will not sign a transit bill without this provision.

Rep. Jim Meyer, R-Naperville, who also opposes the transit bill, said more research needed to be done on the financial effects of giving the state's senior citizens free rides.

Members of the chamber's legislative committee, which supported the original bill without the two amendments, agreed that they were not in favor of the bill as amended.

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