

Transit, county finally get funding

DuPage officials urge voters not to pass tax referendum

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By Paige Winfield Staff writer

After 15 months of closing the door to DuPage County's revenue appeals, Springfield has opened an unexpected window.

A transit bill passed by the General Assembly on Thursday will dump \$40 million in the county's lap, saving departments from enacting more than 200 long-threatened layoffs and cuts to public safety and human service programs.

The bill's quarter-cent tax provision ends a long quest by Bob Schillerstrom, chairman of the DuPage County Board, to find a new revenue source for the county, which has been strapped for funds for the past two years.

"It's definitely exciting and this gives us an opportunity to avoid the layoffs and continue to provide programs and services in this county," Schillerstrom said.

Just last week, Schillerstrom helped to push for a new provision to be added to the \$530 million RTA funding package, which was already slated to increase sales taxes by a quarter-cent in Cook County and a half-cent in the collar counties. The provision allows DuPage and the other collar counties to use a quarter-cent of the sales tax for transportation and public safety needs.

Now, DuPage will have plenty of revenue to meet the needs of the offices of the sheriff, state's attorney, courts, probation department and circuit clerk, whose officials have been pleading for more funding for months. It is estimated a quarter-cent tax will bring in \$40 million annually.

"We still have transportation needs, but nothing like public safety needs," Schillerstrom said. "We pushed to be able to use that revenue for public safety and as we got closer, the leadership agreed."

Now there is no need for DuPage voters to approve the Feb. 5 referendum that would levy a quarter-cent sales tax for public safety agencies, Schillerstrom said.

Before Thursday's vote, officials had been in the midst of campaigning for a referendum to bail the county out of its budget troubles. But now that DuPage has a sales increase, the county board won't seek another, Schillerstrom said.

"The bottom line is we don't seek another quarter-cent (tax) and we won't accept it," said Schillerstrom, who plans to issue a statement today asking voters not to approve the referendum.

County officials can change their tune. County Board member Bob Schroeder of Naperville had just spent the afternoon promoting the referendum at a Naperville retirement home when he heard of the transit bill's success.

Knowing that the bill was under consideration, he told the residents to vote against the referendum if it passed.

"Talk about the irony here ... the timing on this is unbelievable," Schroeder said. "I'm not proud of Illinois government, but I'm grateful that this was finally passed."

As one of the county board's strongest human service advocates, Schroeder said he will push to restore funding to services that were going to be eliminated under the 2008 budget, including the dental program and breast and cervical cancer screenings.

"This (bill) allows us to take the \$40 million from this tax and then use that \$40 million anywhere in our budget," he said. "I'll be fighting for saving human service programs."

The bill's provision didn't persuade three of Naperville's four state legislators to vote for the bill, which they said inappropriately side-stepped voters and should have included capital funding.

Rep. Jim Meyer of Naperville called the bill "completely flawed" and said it should have addressed the state's long-neglected capital needs.

"Nobody down here on either side of the aisle wants to see the mass transit in this state fail," Meyer said. "We all want to address it, but we want to do it in a manner that we look at the whole issues of mass transit and transportation together."

Rep. Joe Dunn, R-Naperville, and Sen. Randy Hultgren, R-Wheaton, also opposed the bill, while Sen. Kirk Dillard, R-Hinsdale, said he approved it only because it solves the funding needs of DuPage County.

"I did not like the sales tax funding for mass transit," Dillard said. "Without the DuPage County provision, which would have required the elimination of nearly 150 law enforcement positions in the county, I would not have supported the sales tax."

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