

Transit bill saves DuPage County government jobs

County government planned to cut 235

By Joseph Sjoström

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The sales-tax increase approved by the legislature Thursday will allow DuPage County government to rescind cutbacks and layoffs that had been planned for mid-February in the sheriff's office, courts, state's attorney's office and most other departments, officials said Thursday.

As part of the state's mass-transit funding bill, the sales tax in Cook County and the collar counties will rise a quarter-cent to pay for mass transit in the Chicago area, while collar counties will see another quarter-cent increase in the sales tax, to be used for transportation projects or public safety.

DuPage County Board Chairman Robert Schillerstrom pushed for the latter option because he said it will generate an estimated \$30 million to \$40 million for his fiscally strapped county. The tax will allow DuPage to restore 235 county government positions, mostly in public safety, that were scheduled to be eliminated, officials said.

The new revenue may also allow the county to consider restoring other county jobs that were lost to budget cutbacks over the last five years, Schillerstrom said.

"Obviously I'm very happy and I'm very grateful to the legislators who worked for and who voted for this measure. I'm especially happy that we won't have to cut the jobs and programs that are so important to the quality of life in DuPage County," Schillerstrom said. "Our first priority is to amend the budget so that employees know they are not going to lose their jobs. ... We'll also get a better handle on whether the restoration of previous cuts might be possible."

Stagnant or declining revenues and rising costs caused staff cutbacks in the county's budgets for 2007 and 2008 and in previous years.

The 2008 budget provides no raises for county employees and cuts about 10 percent of the workforce. Hardest hit were the agencies related to law enforcement, including the Sheriff's Department, which would have lost 104 positions; the state's attorney's office (three); the Probation Department (29); and the court clerk (18). The budget also includes cuts to programs, including emergency dental care for the indigent and cancer screenings.

The \$376 million budget plan for 2008 is about \$52 million less than the 2007 budget, in which the county lost about 40 jobs and cut its contributions to two dozen social programs.

The 2008 fiscal year started Dec. 1; however, the actual cuts were delayed to Feb. 15 pending the outcome of a referendum measure on the Feb. 5 ballot to increase the county's sales tax by one-quarter cent. When that plan was formulated in November, there was no expectation that the legislature would enact a tax increase for public safety. Now that the increase has been approved, there is no need for voters to approve the measure, officials said.

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