

County officials urge 'no' vote on sales-tax referendum

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DuPage County, IL -

Following the Illinois General Assembly's approval last week of a bill to fund Chicago-area mass transit through a sales tax increase, DuPage County officials are telling residents to vote against a ballot measure to increase the county sales tax.

The bill will raise sales tax by a quarter cent in Cook County and by a half cent in DuPage and the other collar counties. The extra quarter-cent tax in the collar counties can be used either for transportation projects or for public-safety operations.

Approval of the bill essentially makes the measure on the Tuesday, Feb. 5, primary ballot a moot point. The referendum measure asks voters to approve a quarter-cent sales-tax increase to fund public safety.

"With the relief that we received from the General Assembly, we do not need, nor do we want, another quarter-cent sales tax for public safety," County Board Chairman Robert Schillerstrom said. "I would urge voters to vote no on the public-safety referendum."

Schillerstrom is preparing an amendment to the 2008 budget to account for the new sales tax revenue, which officials estimate could bring in as much as \$40 million annually. The budget passed by the County Board in November calls for spending to be reduced by \$52 million from 2007 and for 235 jobs to be eliminated.

"My intention is to eliminate the scheduled layoffs that would have taken place and reinstitute programs to at least the 2007 level," Schillerstrom said.

He expects to present the amendment to the board at its Tuesday, Feb. 12, meeting for approval.

State's Attorney Joe Birkett said while he believes voters would have approved the referendum measure, he is happy the General Assembly provided the county with much-needed revenue.

Birkett said he will now push for more prosecutors and other staff members for his office. Before the 2008 budget was approved, the board's Judicial and Public Safety Committee approved 11 additional employees — including seven prosecutors — for Birkett's office, but those positions were eliminated in the budget.

In addition to sustaining cuts to his staff over the past few years, Birkett has seen programs such as community prosecutions and the special victims unit eliminated.

"Hopefully all those cuts will be restored," Birkett said. "We will make our case to the County Board. We don't expect it to happen all at once, but over time we want to get back up on our feet."

Sheriff John Zaruba also praised the General Assembly for providing a new revenue source for the county.

"I am happy that the state legislators finally realized the urgent need that faced the citizens of DuPage County," Zaruba said in a written statement. "I applaud them, especially Sens. (Dan) Cronin, (Kirk) Dillard and (John) Millner for taking a hard stand for their constituents. I look forward to working with Chairman Schillerstrom in the process of revitalizing public safety in DuPage County."