

County discovers surplus

Transit tax will give county extra \$10 million to allocate

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By Paige Winfield Staff writer

Last week, DuPage had a \$10 million shortage. This week, the county has a \$10 million excess.

So instead of cutting corners and preparing for more than 200 layoffs, officials are discussing where to appropriate the extra funds. Bob Schillerstrom, County Board chairman, said his first priority is to return to last year's budget levels.

"Certainly I'd like to get back to 2007 as a minimum," he said. "That would forestall the layoffs and the elimination of services and programs."

DuPage's financial tide reversed Thursday with the passage of a \$530 million RTA funding bill. The bill includes a quarter-cent sales tax increase for transportation and public safety in Cook County's collar counties, which will bring DuPage an estimated \$47 million per year.

If the tax increase is enacted in April, DuPage will receive its first check in July, Schillerstrom said. He expects revenues will total about \$20 million to \$24 million for the rest of the 2007 fiscal year.

It will take only half of that sum to restore funding to the departments hit hard by 2008 budget cuts, including the state's attorney, sheriff, circuit clerk, courts and probation. So now the County Board has a sizable amount of money to allocate where it chooses.

Schillerstrom said the money likely will be used for additional public safety needs, transportation or construction projects. In making its decisions, the board will refer to a detailed strategic plan completed last spring that outlines the county's needs and goals for the next five years.

"We certainly want to use some of this money for transportation," Schillerstrom said. "We'll sit down and look at that plan to see what percentage we want to use on transportation. That's the process we'll be going through these next few weeks."

As the economy heads toward a potential recession, the board also will consider whether the cash reserves should be further built up, Schillerstrom said. Hovering around \$33 million at the end of the year, the reserves will sustain government county operations until the additional revenues start coming in.

Decisions need to be made and a new budget must be approved by Feb. 15, which is the day the budget cuts approved in November are set to kick in.

Urging 'no' vote

Officials are now urging a "no" vote for the Feb. 5 referendum that would institute another quarter-cent sales tax increase countywide.

Schillerstrom and board members say in the unlikely event that the referendum passes, they will vote to repeal it.

At Tuesday's board meeting, board members offered their congratulations to Schillerstrom for finding a new revenue source after months of lobbying in Springfield.

"I don't know whether it was your patience or stubbornness to win the battle," said Bob Schroeder of Naperville, who also thanked state Sen. Kirk Dillard, R-Hinsdale; Sen. Dan Cronin, R-Lombard; and Sen. John Millner, R-Bloomington, for being the only Republicans to vote for the bill.

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