

County to divvy up \$20 million

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By Paige Winfield Staff writer pwinfield@scn1.com

Slicing up \$20 million in new revenue is a welcome task facing the DuPage County Board in the coming weeks.

Building a rainy-day fund, abating a property tax increase and funding transportation projects are some of the options before the board as members consider how to use an additional quarter-cent sales tax.

But the board's first priority is to halt layoffs of 100 county employees slated for next Tuesday. When they approved a tight 2008 budget in November, members postponed more than 200 layoffs until this month in case a new revenue source was found.

About 100 positions already have been emptied through attrition. And the tax increase provided by an Regional Transit Authority funding bill approved last month makes it unnecessary to weed out any more employees.

Restoring staffing to 2007 levels is the purpose of a special board meeting scheduled for Friday by County Board Chairman Bob Schillerstrom.

"It's a stopgap thing that must be done to keep these people from being laid off," said Schillerstrom, who also raised the possibility that the county's hiring freeze may be lifted in the next few weeks.

Retaining the 235 employees eliminated under the original 2008 budget will cost the county \$10.5 million, said Chief Financial Officer Fred Backfield, who estimates the new sales tax will bring the county \$20 million to \$24 million this year. That leaves about \$10 million for other funding needs.

Schillerstrom offered a few suggestions at Tuesday's board meeting, including canceling a \$2.7 million property tax increase before tax bills are sent to county residents in May.

The board had decided for the third year in a row to increase property taxes, approving the maximum levy increase allowed by the property tax cap.

Another option is to create a rainy-day fund of up to \$5 million that would provide some insurance against future budget shortfalls, Schillerstrom said. The county sheriff, state's attorney, courts and probation services would especially benefit from such a fund since more than 75 percent of personal costs come from those departments.

Backfield agreed that the fund would give the county a "strategic reserve" to guard against cutting crucial public safety services.

"The county should use a portion of the sales tax for a strategic approach to protect public safety in case of adverse economic conditions or emergency," he said.

Passed by the Illinois General Assembly in January, the \$530 million RTA funding bill reversed DuPage County's receding financial tide. The bill includes a quarter-cent sales tax increase in the collar counties.

While the additional revenue seems to open a range of new possibilities for the county, board member Jim Zay of Carol Stream warned his colleagues against spending all of the funding and advocated for the rainy-day fund.

"It's not like we're kids in a candy store ... spend, spend, spend," Zay said. "We have to be prudent, we have to be very careful and make sure we don't have the same problem in the future."