

Should Bob be more like Todd?

By Jim Davis | Daily Herald Columnist

Published: 10/19/2007 12:21 AM

Perhaps Bob Schillerstrom should be more like Todd Stroger.

Stroger, the Cook County Board chairman, wants to bail out the county from its financial morass by doubling the county gas tax, bumping up its sales tax by 2 percentage points, doubling the county surcharge on parking and who knows what else.

The higher sales tax alone would rake in as much as \$1 billion. And the total take from the new revenue streams might be a little more than the county actually needs right now -- but Stroger says he doesn't want to go through all this angst year after year. Plus, if the county has too much money sitting around, he might give some of it back.

Meanwhile, Schillerstrom, head of the DuPage County Board, is looking for ways to pull DuPage from its financial morass. He clings to dimming hope the state legislature will give him the OK to place a heavy tax on smokers. He's already raided the DuPage Water Commission's plentiful reserves. Why doesn't he just be like Todd and jack up the county's gas and sales taxes? Surely, given the ridiculous cost of gas these days, who'll notice a few more pennies at the pump?

Wait a minute. This just in to the newsroom: Chairman Bob can't do any of those things!

Cook County, you see, has home rule, meaning it has the authority to initiate and raise taxes without the OK of state lawmakers. There's also all sorts of state laws that apply to Cook and no other counties. (And, by the way, this isn't always a bad thing for the Average Joe. Cook is the only county in Illinois with a property tax system that classifies residential property for tax purposes at 16 percent of a home's market value; everywhere else, it's 33.3 percent. If you've ever compared your tax bill with a friend in Cook County, likely you'll see his/her's is dramatically lower.)

DuPage has flirted with home rule, as avid watchers of county government know. It's led to angry debate, lawsuits and even the political demise of a man once thought to be invincible in the world of county politics -- the late and former county board Chairman Jack Knuepfer, who once advocated home rule as a way to get some things done. It's a ticking time bomb county board members carefully walk around.

In the latest development on the budget crunch, Schillerstrom projects laying off more than 200 employees, many from the public safety sector, which led to some strident protests led by State's Attorney Joe Birkett, who said Monday he wasn't even going to talk about layoffs within his department because county board members "have to do something." Later in the week, the defiance continued. Informed sources tell this column Circuit Court Clerk Chris Kachiroubas met with more than 150 employees Thursday and vowed there would be no job cuts from his office. "It was like a high school pep rally," one employee said.

Well, those "somethings" are kinda few and far between. Thanks to the tax cap, property taxes can be jacked up only so much each year. Look for home rule to be briefly or quietly debated, then discarded -- but my hat would go off to the county official with the gumption to suggest a vote by the DuPage citizenry on this. My hat would go off, but I suspect the masses would go to the polls and drive a stake through such a notion. Because, let's be honest, who knows how many Todd Strogers are lurking out there.

Look, instead, for debate about increasing some fees. The county apparently can require all motorists to buy a vehicle sticker for, say, \$50 a year, for instance. That would bring in an extra \$40 million.