

Outcry over DuPage budget cuts gets louder

By Marni Pyke | Daily Herald Staff

Published: 10/24/2007 12:28 AM

Proposed DuPage County budget cuts will decimate the county's probation department, threaten public safety and put young offenders at risk, workers told elected leaders Tuesday.

The county board is contemplating a budget that would reduce expenses by \$50 million and lay off 235 employees. It would also slash the probation department by 20 percent.

"The ripple effect of this can't be imagined," probation officer Dana Andrewson said.

"We feel it's time to stand up and be heard."

More than 25 probation officers with the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees appealed to county leaders to spare their department.

The county has until Nov. 30 to approve what often is referred to as its doomsday budget, proposed by Chairman Robert Schillerstrom.

Fewer probation officers will mean young offenders get less guidance and increase the chances of recidivism, staffers warned. It also means fewer people keeping tabs on adult offenders living in the community.

"They live next door to you, and we're the front line," Andrewson said. "The offenders know we're out there."

Probation officer Nate Lanthrum said one of the bright spots of his job is giving juvenile offenders a chance to turn their lives around.

"Some of these youths may not be able to have a tomorrow without these services," he said.

AFSCME organizers also promised their support to the county board if it moves toward getting a referendum question on a public safety tax in the February primary or November general election.

A quarter-cent sales tax increase could generate up to \$40 million and be used for the sheriff's department, plus state's attorney's and public defender's offices.

Sheriff John Zaruba said he would back such an initiative. The sheriff's office has been threatened with 100 layoffs.

"I'll support anything to keep public safety afloat," Zaruba said, adding losing just one person would "dismantle my office."

"I have no intention of putting public safety at risk. It's not what I was elected for."

Meanwhile, Schillerstrom said he feels everyone's pain but the county has simply run out of funds.

"It will cause tremendous hardships for all the departments. I don't like this budget, I don't think anyone should."

The best hope the county has is for the General Assembly to pass legislation giving DuPage the ability to tax cigarettes, Schillerstrom said.

"If we don't have the money we're going to have to make the tough decisions," he said. "We need something we can use today for next year's budget."

State lawmakers have not yet ended their marathon overtime session, and a number of issues are still unresolved, including the cigarette tax. But whether it would pass is a significant unknown.