

More law enforcement officials decry proposed county budget

By Dan Petrella, dpetrella@mysuburbanlife.com

GateHouse News Service

Wed Oct 24, 2007, 03:09 PM CDT

DuPage County, IL -

DuPage County's probation and youth detention officers joined other law enforcement and public safety officials Tuesday in calling for a sales-tax increase to prevent budget cuts and layoffs proposed last week by County Board Chairman Robert Schillerstrom.

About 40 officers appeared at Tuesday's County Board meeting sporting green T-shirts with the name of their union written across the chest. The employees are represented by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees.

Schillerstrom's proposed 2008 budget calls for probation's funding to be cut by \$700,000 and for 29 employees to be laid off, reducing the department's staff by nearly 20 percent.

Dana Andrewson is a probation officer and president of AFSCME Local 3328, which represents about 130 probation and Youth Home detention officers in DuPage County. He correct said probation services cannot handle the cuts after losing 11 percent of its personnel last year.

"The workload would increase dramatically, so much so that it would be impossible to do the work," he said.

The county's probation officers serve about 15,000 people each year, including drunken driving evaluations, court-order psych evaluations and community service placements, Andrewson said. About 4,000 of those people are convicted adult offenders placed on probation.

The county has many programs aimed at rehabilitating juvenile offenders, which are at risk if staff cuts are made, probation officials said.

The county's top law enforcement officials last week proposed a quarter-cent sales tax increase to fund public safety. The measure would have to be approved by voters through a referendum, which the officials hope the County Board will place on the February ballot.

Andrewson pledged the union's support for collecting signatures and educating voters about a referendum measure. He said members also will contact legislators in Springfield to support the proposed \$1-per-pack cigarette tax that officials believe could generate as much as \$25 million in new revenue for the county each year.

Schillerstrom said he is not opposed to a sales tax referendum, but he believes right now attention should be focused on lobbying Springfield to pass the cigarette tax.

"We need action out of the legislature to give us a revenue source that we can use today for next year's budget," he said. "Once that's done, obviously, we are going to sit down; there's going to be a lot of discussion talking about a long-range plan for a stable revenue source."

Without the immediate source of funding the cigarette tax could provide, the county will have to institute cuts similar to those in his proposal, Schillerstrom said.

The County Board must pass a budget by Saturday, Dec. 1, when its next fiscal year begins. There would still be time after that for the board to place a referendum measure on the February ballot.