

County board mulls sales tax

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By Paige Winfield Staff writer

More discussion over a new sales tax is pending as DuPage County Board members continue looking for a way out of next year's budget crisis.

Even as they continue to hope for legislative approval to levy a cigarette tax, board members plan on discussing a quarter-cent sales tax that could boost county funding by \$35 million.

The sales tax is vigorously supported by the county's public safety officials, who say reducing next year's budget by 12 percent is unacceptable.

More than 20 members of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees turned out at Tuesday's County Board meeting to protest the severely slashed budget, which would reduce the county's staff of probation officers by 20 percent.

"To cut probation services by 20 percent is to cut one of the first lines of defense of public safety," said Florence Estes, staff representative for the federation. "It's a safety issue for the county of DuPage."

In the wake of a tight 2007 budget that cut probation staffing by 11 percent, officers already are forced to take on enormous case loads, Estes said. She said further reductions will leave probation and detention officers unable to properly supervise the county's sex offenders, gang members and drug dealers.

"The impact would be offenders who can engage in criminal activity a second time," she said. "That probability would go up. It would create a crisis in probation services."

County board members starting talking in January about placing a sales tax referendum on the April ballot. But no actions were taken after state legislators advised that it would take at least a year and cost one-quarter to three-quarters of a million dollars to adequately educate voters so they would vote for the tax increase.

To place a sales tax referendum on the Feb. 5 ballot, the board would have to pass a resolution by Dec. 3 and file with the DuPage County Election Commission by Dec. 6.

Board member Jim Healy of Naperville proposed the motion for members to discuss the sales tax at the next Finance Committee meeting.

"Everybody keeps talking about the referendum, but nobody seems to get it moving," Healy said.

Board Chairman Robert Schillerstrom said he is not opposed to discussing a new sales tax, but that he will remain focused on obtaining the cigarette tax until the close of the General Assembly's session.

"I believe what the probation officers say is correct and I'm committed to helping them get those resources," Schillerstrom said. "(But) my focus right now is on getting a new revenue source for this budget."