

Officials: Time to find solutions to budget woes

Cigarette tax not only option, leaders argue

October 30, 2007

By Paige Winfield Staff writer

DuPage officials listening to a familiar litany of financial woes Monday complained that the county needs to stop griping about stiff budget cuts and start solving the problem.

Heads of the county's public safety, environmental, stormwater and emergency management departments presented to the County Board's finance and public safety committees what they say will be dire effects of proposed 12 percent budget cuts next year.

The warnings are nothing new for board members, who have heard pleas from the state's attorney, circuit clerk, chief judge and sheriff since Chairman Bob Schillerstrom presented his 2008 budget earlier this month.

Board member Jim Zay of Carol Stream said he was frustrated that the board is not spending more time discussing additional revenue sources that could bail the county out of its budget crisis.

"We've had committee on committee and I've heard the sheriff talk at least three times," Zay said. "At some point we have to stop wasting staff time and move this budget forward. I don't know how many times they have to beat us over the head."

Zay said county officials should accept the fact that the long-anticipated cigarette tax bill may not pass in Springfield and should begin discussing other revenue options. Schillerstrom continues to focus his energies on rallying legislators to support the bill, which would allow DuPage County to raise an estimated \$25 million to \$50 million through a \$1 tax on cigarette packs.

"I think (Schillerstrom's) put a lot of eggs in one basket," Zay said. "We can't be held hostage by Springfield ... we have to move forward."

Board member Paul Fichtner of Elmhurst suggested the members present at Monday's meeting a list of revenue options - such as a long-discussed public safety tax or vehicle sticker tax - even though the gathering was scheduled to be a budget hearing.

"I think we need to white-board options," he said. "There's a series of options that I think would be appropriate to at least at this meeting bring up."

If the cigarette tax fails to come through, many county officials say the next best new revenue source may be a quarter-cent sales tax that would raise \$35 million to \$50 million for the public safety agencies.

But even if board members decided this week to put the question on the Feb. 5 ballot, they would only have three months to persuade voters to pass the referendum - a process state legislators have said could take as long as a year and cost hundreds of thousands of dollars.

The earlier primary - which is usually held mid-March - would make it even harder to educate voters about the need for a public safety tax since much of campaigning would have to occur during the holiday season, said state Sen. Randy Hultgren, R-Wheaton.

While Hultgren said county officials need to make up their own minds on whether to keep chasing the cigarette tax or focus on a public safety tax, they should agree on which revenue source to pursue.

"I do think it would help if they were as united as possible in determining which area to focus on," he said.