

Public safety leaders issue warnings over proposed county cuts

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DuPage County's top public safety leaders warned Monday decreased revenues would mean increased crime.

After pinning their hopes on the General Assembly passing a cigarette tax, which looks increasingly unlikely, DuPage board members are considering a budget that is \$50 million less than this year's and could lead to 235 layoffs, including 179 from law enforcement.

The proposed staff losses would have a domino effect translating into lines at the circuit clerk's office, delays in cases getting to trial, insufficient sheriff's police and reduced monitoring of released felons, officials warned.

For example, fewer probation officers to keep track of domestic battery offenders, means "increased homicides, suicides, increased stalking and increased batteries against family members and police officers," Chief Judge Ann Jorgensen said during a hearing on the cuts.

Jorgensen estimated that slashing the circuit court's budget by 12 percent would throw a wrench into getting criminal cases processed.

"Trials will not proceed because we don't have the budget to pay jurors," Jorgensen said. Continuances will increase, and "at the worst, victims will eventually give up. They'll leave the DuPage County system feeling it does not work for them."

Sheriff John Zaruba said his department already was down 45 people due to layoffs and employees leaving because of fears of benefit cuts and minimal raises.

"That's what you've done so far: You've scared the people who work for me," Zaruba said.

The sheriff's office has "scrimped and saved" for years," Zaruba said. Now staff is stretched to the limit.

"My job is to implore you to do the right thing," he said. "To work to find another avenue to keep law enforcement on the street, to keep our streets safe and keep our criminals in jail."

State's Attorney Joseph Birkett said there are 72 assistant state's attorneys on his staff but according to national standards there should be 93. Birkett and his first assistant are handling extra cases on top of administrative duties because "we're out of bodies."

Recently, 10 prosecutors have left to take jobs with other counties where "there's less stress and they pay more," Birkett said.

For 2008, Birkett is seeking to hire 12 more prosecutors because now, "we're in crisis mode," he said.

Circuit Court Clerk Chris Kachiroubas noted that his staff is down by 17 positions. More layoffs would result in dissatisfied customers.

"It may be a triple or quadruple increase in terms of the time you wait," he said.

Public safety officials making their cases before the joint finance and judicial and public safety committees were basically preaching to the choir.

Board members said they sympathized but took no action on the few revenue-raising options possible. These include a vehicle sticker fee or a referendum on a sales tax increase to fund public safety.

Other areas covered during the second of two budget hearings included environmental services and storm-water management.

The storm-water budget is already at the minimum, storm-water committee Chairman Jim Zay said.

"We've eliminated voluntary buyouts," Zay said referring to the practice of purchasing properties that chronically flood. "Flood control projects are deferred, water quality improvements are deferred."

More reductions will mean the county can't maintain its flood-control facilities, such as dams and reservoirs, and higher liability.

"If we don't maintain our facilities and someone's house floods or Wood Dale floods, that will be our responsibility," Zay said.

Economic Development Director Tom Cuculich said reductions in his budget will mean shuttering a popular household hazardous waste pickup facility in Naperville and cutting subsidies to a recycling education center and paint recycling center.