

Officials continue opposition to proposed budget cuts

Tue Oct 30, 2007, 03:34 PM CDT

DuPage County, IL -

County officials repeated their gloom-and-doom messages about the impact of impending budget cuts Monday as County Board members voiced growing frustration over their inability to find a new revenue source to stave off the cuts.

State's Attorney Joe Birkett, Chief Judge Ann Jorgensen, Circuit Court Clerk Chris Kachiroubas, Sheriff John Zaruba and public defender Bob Miller addressed a joint meeting of the board's Finance and Judicial and Public Safety committees, reiterating their message that cuts proposed by County Board Chairman Robert Schillerstrom are "unacceptable."

The officials all stand to lose employees from their offices and money from their budgets if the board approves the proposed cuts. Overall, the county's budget will be reduced by roughly \$50 million, and 235 workers will lose their jobs.

While his office will lose eight employees if the cuts are implemented, Miller expressed his support for Birkett's request for 11 additional positions in the state's attorney's office.

"You could give our office 300 attorneys. And if the state's attorney's office is understaffed, nothing will move forward," he said.

Zaruba, speaking publicly about the cuts for the first time since Schillerstrom announced his proposal Oct. 16, admonished board members for considering further layoffs in his office. This year the board eliminated roughly 30 unfilled positions from the sheriff's office. Another 10 employees left because of fears about job security, Zaruba said.

If the board approves the chairman's proposal, Zaruba's office will lose 104 employees.

When board members asked where he would make the cuts if he had to, Zaruba said "all areas" and refused to elaborate.

"I'm hoping I don't have to make any cuts," he said. "I'm anticipating this body will come up with a solution."

Board members showed frustration that they have not moved forward with any attempts to secure new revenue sources to prevent the cuts.

Since last year, the board has been waiting for Springfield to pass a bill that would allow the county to collect a new \$1-per-pack cigarette tax. Schillerstrom has encouraged county officials to focus their attention on lobbying legislators to approve the tax.

County Board member Grant Eckhoff, R-4th District, of Wheaton said he understands the message officials are sending about the budget.

"I believed them two weeks ago," he said. "It seems like we need to talk about a solution."

Despite similar comments from several board members, there was no discussion of potential revenue sources at Monday's meeting.

The public safety officials have requested the board place a referendum on the Feb. 5 primary ballot asking voters to approve a quarter-cent sales-tax increase. The board has yet to act on that request. A countywide vehicle sticker fee also has been proposed, but no action has been taken.

Board member James Zay, R-6th District, of Carol Stream addressed the committees Monday about the impact budget cuts will have on the county's storm-water management programs. Zay is chairman of the board's Stormwater Management Committee.

The budget for storm-water programs will be reduced by \$4.2 million if Schillerstrom's budget is approved, resulting in deferred maintenance at the county's flood-control facilities in Wood Dale and Elmhurst.

The Stormwater Management Division will have no new tax-funded projects in 2008. Many of the division's operations are mandated by the federal Clean Water Act, and the county could be fined if water-quality standards are not met.

The division is considering a utility fee for county property owners that would be assessed based on the amount of impervious material, such as concrete and asphalt, on a property. That proposal has not reached the board for approval.

The County Board must approve a budget before its next fiscal year begins Saturday, Dec. 1.