

Law enforcement needs funding boost

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Crime doesn't pay.

As long as we pay to fight it, that is.

And there should be no doubt that the excellent law enforcement system in DuPage County will start listing badly without the ballast of a funding boost.

DuPage County State's Attorney Joe Birkett has made a convincing case in arguing that making up a huge county budget shortfall through cuts in his staff won't be good for anybody except the bad guys.

Not that DuPage County will become a spaghetti western town waiting for Clint Eastwood to save them from the killers that have taken control of the streets. It's not that dire. What we do see, in the absence of an infusion of money for the prosecutor's office, is a steady and alarming weakening of a fine system of investigating crime and prosecuting criminals, and one that gives lawbreakers who deserve a second chance access to rehabilitation.

Birkett's office is already short-staffed. More cuts in personnel will stretch this office thin to the point where everything from assembling evidence to having speedy trials for the worst among us will become very difficult. The risk of mistakes in prosecutions is bound to rise. And the best and the brightest in the prosecutor's office, running on the last fumes of loyalty, will eventually leave for places where both the pay and morale is better. That's happening now.

DuPage County Sheriff John Zaruba, the probation staff, the judges, all tell similar stories. And these aren't the warnings of end-of-the-world wackos. They're telling the truth.

The DuPage County board isn't unsympathetic, even if the same can't be said of Springfield. So far, the Legislature has not given DuPage County the authority to levy a cigarette tax to bolster its budget.

There are other solutions. The county is looking at creating a vehicle sticker tax of \$50 a car that could generate \$40 million a year. But this wildly unpopular way of raising money could be difficult to administer and enforce. A better option for raising that same \$40 million would be raising the county sales tax by a quarter-cent. But that can't be done without voters giving it the OK in a referendum.

DuPage County voters should support a small sales tax hike in support of law enforcement, if asked to do so. But those needing and wanting it would have to make their case to the public. There is a case to be made. Moreover, if voters are given the choice between paying a tax on their vehicles -- which can apparently be implemented without voter approval -- and a sales tax hike, they might find the latter to be more palatable. Many county residents are already paying municipal vehicle sticker fees.

But any request of taxpayers to give up more of their money has to be coupled with county government officials giving up things of their own. DuPage County board members, the DuPage County board chairman, and county officeholders -- including those in charge of law enforcement -- are paid pretty good salaries and some stand to get a generous pension. Some board members agree there has to be give-backs on compensation. And that is how it should be across the board. If the answer to making a sacrifice on salaries and benefits is no, than who would blame voters for saying the same to any proposed sales tax hike?