

No answer to county budget question

Board wants real solutions instead of steep cuts

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By Paige Winfield Staff Writer

DuPage County officials remain helpless to lift themselves from an impending budget crisis, even as austere cuts loom less than a month away.

Fifteen months have passed since members of a special Financial Forecast Committee warned that 20 percent cuts would have to be made to the budget during the next two years to avoid operating under a \$50 million deficit. At that time, committee members examined a buffet of new revenue sources, including a cigarette tax and a public safety sales tax.

But the DuPage County Board seems to have moved little from where it stood a year ago when members approved a budget that fell \$21 million short of requested funding.

The story sounds much the same this year as board members consider 12 percent budget cuts proposed by Chairman Bob Schillerstrom.

That situation has caused some board members to point fingers at the county leader.

Blame game

Schillerstrom has spent the last year unsuccessfully lobbying in Springfield for permission to levy a cigarette tax that would bail the county out of its financial crisis.

"People are just tired of waiting. ... There is no more patience on the County Board," member Jim Healy of Naperville said.

Board member Debbie Olson of Wheaton also expressed frustration with Schillerstrom, saying that long-term budgeting should have been in place to prevent the county from ever reaching such a tight financial position.

"Everyone's pretty much tired of waiting for the chairman," she said.

Elected officials have known for years that a major revenue source for the county would run out in 2007. In 2002, the DuPage Water Commission agreed to transfer \$15 million to the county annually for five years to scale back the commission's excessive cash reserves.

Schillerstrom defended himself against the criticisms by pointing out that the board formally voted to pursue a cigarette tax earlier this year.

"We talked with the legislators, and they said that the cigarette tax was the best option we had," he said. "The decision was made by many people."

But Jim Zay of Carol Stream, who was chairman of the Financial Forecast Committee, said the board should have been long pursuing other options instead of just chasing the elusive cigarette tax.

"We've been talking about (a new revenue source) for the last few years," he said. "Why haven't we done it?"

Sales tax

Board members did have several lengthy discussions in January and February about a public safety sales tax that would have to be approved by referendum. But the talks ended when state legislators predicted that voters would probably reject the referendum if it were placed on this year's April ballot.

Now some board members are pushing to resume discussion of the sales tax, while others are highly dubious of its chances for success.

"I don't think it has any chance whatsoever," said Mike McMahon, chairman of the Judicial and Public Safety Committee. "Unless a referendum has something to do with trees or space, I don't think DuPage County will pass it."

Jim Healy gives the referendum a "50-50" chance of passing in February, but said it would be in "good shape" if it were given a second chance on the November 2008 ballot.

The County Board would have to pass a resolution by Dec. 3 for a referendum to be placed on the February ballot.

Board members are expected to reject Schillerstrom's budget when they vote in a special call meeting Friday afternoon. If that occurs, Schillerstrom will have less than 30 days to bring an amended budget before the board. The deadline for an approved budget is Nov. 30.