

County board weighs cuts, revenue options

November 9, 2007

By Paige Winfield Staff writer

An unwilling tug of war is raging over DuPage County's 2008 budget.

Public safety officials are yanking on one side, saying the county sheriff, state's attorney and circuit clerk's offices will deteriorate under proposed 10 percent cuts. Pulling on the other side are heads of human service departments, who retort that 25 percent cuts to their budgets will come back to hurt public safety in the county.

But in just three weeks, both sides may lose.

Nov. 30 is the deadline for the county board to approve next year's budget, which Chairman Bob Schillerstrom has slashed by 12 percent to avoid deficit spending.

Complaints about the 235 layoffs called for next year have thickened the atmosphere at the county complex in Wheaton ever since Schillerstrom's mid-October budget presentation. Department heads say they will not accept any more staff reductions after 2007 cuts reduced them to bare-minimum operating levels.

County board members agree, with a majority saying they will vote to reject the budget in its current form. But almost a month after Schillerstrom presented the budget, no board member has formally proposed any solutions.

No other plan

According to county board rules, the Finance Committee was required to recommend and present a budget no later than Oct. 23. So far, members have sat through hours of budget hearings, but no actual discussions have taken place.

Board members say they plan to discuss cuts and ways to find a new revenue source at a special call meeting this afternoon.

"I would like to see a comprehensive discussion of the budget we've been given," said board member Debbie Olson of Wheaton. "Something different from the hearings that we've been having."

While Olson declined to divulge any of the budget options she says she is considering, board member Grant Eckhoff of Wheaton suggested freeing up dollars by cutting funding from programs such as DuPage Biz and SCARCE. He also wonders if some fees earmarked for departments such as economic development could be transferred to more financially needy departments.

What will happen to the budget during the next few weeks is anyone's guess. Some board members want to amend the proposed budget, while others say they should reject it and send it back to Schillerstrom for revision.

No matter how they juggle this year's funds, board members agree that the county will be swimming in deep water until a new revenue source is found - possibly in the form of a public safety sales tax.

"We need to put on the table how much a safety tax is going to raise, and then we need to come to a consensus," Eckhoff said. "At some point, we have to step up as leaders and lead."

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