

DuPage Co. board gets serious on revenue

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Published: 11/10/2007 12:22 AM

The resolution of DuPage County's budget crisis could ultimately rest with people who walk into the voting booth Feb. 5.

County board members Friday considered holding a referendum asking voters to increase the sales tax in DuPage a quarter-cent, which could generate more than \$40 million annually to fund public safety.

At the same time, the board also is pondering enacting a \$50 vehicle sticker fee in 2008 as a stopgap measure to avoid a "doomsday budget" that would result in 235 layoffs. Such a fee could net an estimated \$25 million.

The thinking is that if voters approve the sales tax proposal, the vehicle sticker could be eliminated before it goes into effect.

Some officials worried voters would see the two options as an "either/or" choice.

"My concern is that people will think 'they'll give me a tax regardless,'" board member Paul Fichtner said.

Board member Michael McMahon noted that a vehicle sticker tax would "obviously be very unpopular," but "I think the board needs to wake up and show leadership," he said.

Friday's unusual "quasi committee of the whole" left some officials with optimism that momentum to act was building.

"What we needed to do today was build a consensus, and I think we saw some progress," county Chairman Robert Schillerstrom said.

Still unresolved is whether the vehicle fee should be approved with provisos, such as rescinding it should the public safety tax pass.

But it's uncertain whether tax-wary board members -- especially those facing primary battles -- will agree to either measure at a special meeting set for Thursday.

Some board members such as Robert Schroeder said they were ready to move on the two options.

"I'll do anything to prevent these cuts," Schroeder said.

Others were split.

"A vehicle sticker is very hard to embrace," board member J.R. McBride said. "A referendum is the best way to go."

Board member Grant Eckhoff said while a sales tax increase wasn't "something you like to do," it would be paid for not just by residents but by anyone shopping in DuPage.

And finance committee Chairman Pat O'Shea hinted that he might have some alternatives to cutting staff or raising taxes that he'll unveil Tuesday.

Meanwhile, pressure is mounting on elected officials to act. State's Attorney Joseph Birkett is organizing a rally at noon Tuesday at the county headquarters to protest budget cuts, which involve firing 179 law enforcement workers.

Officials had held out hopes the General Assembly would pass legislation allowing the county to enact a cigarette tax to drum up revenues, but Schillerstrom acknowledged that option was all but dead.

The vehicle sticker fee is the only fundraising option the county board, which is not home rule, has at its disposal. Other revenue boosts require approval from the General Assembly or voters.