

County Board mulls two revenue sources

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By Paige Winfield Staff Writer

DuPage officials are standing between two revenue ladders that could allow the county to escape from a pit of financial despondency.

One is a vehicle sticker tax; the other is a public safety sales tax. Each would levy about \$25 million in 2008, said DuPage County Board members, who decided at a meeting Friday that formally considering both options is their first priority as they discuss the 2008 budget.

The board will vote later this week on whether to pursue one or both of the options, County Board Chairman Bob Schillerstrom said. If members reject pursuing either of the new revenues, they will have to come up with a new solution or approve a budget that cuts 235 jobs and \$10 million from next year's corporate budget.

Admitting to the unlikely chances of obtaining from Springfield a long-sought cigarette tax, Schillerstrom declined to say whether he is supporting the sales tax or the vehicle tax. He did say he'll informally discuss both options with board members this week.

Raising revenue

Because the sales tax would have to be approved by voters, approving the vehicle sticker tax is the only way the board could sidestep making cuts to the budget before the fiscal year begins Dec. 1.

Requiring drivers to purchase a \$50 sticker per vehicle would raise about \$25 million annually, assuming that about 60 percent of residents complied. The county treasurer would mail stickers to residents after they paid the fee either by mail or online, and collection would probably start around May.

The board could also put a quarter-cent sales tax referendum on the ballot in February, but after that, it would be up to voters to approve the new revenue.

"Fees and fines are basically maxed out," Schillerstrom said. "The only thing we can do now to raise revenue is a vehicle sticker tax."

Costs to raise it

Even though the vehicle sticker tax offers an immediate budget solution, board members expressed concerns over how much it would cost to administer and enforce the tax.

Board member Paul Fichtner said he observed how residents responded to a vehicle sticker tax levied by the city of Elmhurst, and doubted they would easily accept also paying for a county vehicle sticker.

"(In Elmhurst) they made a connection between that vehicle sticker and what they're getting out of that," Fichtner said. "That doesn't exist at the county level, because the county government doesn't touch peoples' lives in the same way municipal government does."

Board member Grant Eckhoff of Wheaton said he prefers the sales tax but thinks the board also should approve the vehicle sticker tax to make sure that new revenue still would be available if voters rejected the referendum in February. If the referendum did pass, the board could repeal the sticker tax before collection began, he said.

"We would know either way," he said. "That seems to me the best thing for us because we can pass a budget that more of us want, and our employees would know they still have their jobs."

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