

County Board weighs two tax options

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DuPage County, IL -

With all hope gone that the Illinois General Assembly will approve a cigarette tax for DuPage County in time for next year's budget, the DuPage County Board will vote this week on two other tax proposals to stave off massive budget cuts and layoffs.

At a special meeting Friday, the board considered creating a \$50 vehicle sticker fee and placing a referendum on the Feb. 5 primary ballot asking voters to approve a quarter-cent sales tax increase. It will hold another special meeting Thursday to vote on the proposals.

Without a new revenue source, the county will have to cut \$50 million from its budget and lay off 235 employees, according to the 2008 budget proposed by County Board Chairman Robert Schillerstrom. The board must approve a budget before Saturday, Dec. 1, when its 2008 fiscal year begins.

The vehicle sticker fee would raise about \$25 million annually, county officials said. That would be enough revenue to restore the county budget to this year's level, Schillerstrom said.

While many board members appeared supportive of the vehicle sticker, others expressed doubt about administering and enforcing the new fee.

Board member Paul Fichtner, R-District 1, of Elmhurst said when he was on the Elmhurst City Council, the city had a vehicle sticker. People were supportive of a fee because on a daily basis they saw the street improvements and downtown redevelopment it funded, he said.

"At the county, I think it's going to be difficult for people to make the connection between the cost and the benefits of the vehicle sticker," he said.

Enforcement also will be a problem because sheriff's deputies who could ticket drivers failing to buy the sticker only patrol unincorporated sections of the county, he added.

The quarter-cent sales tax increase is backed by the county's public safety and law enforcement officials, who called for the referendum the same day Schillerstrom announced his budget plan.

The increase would bring in an estimated \$40 million each year, officials said. Several board members noted that, unlike a vehicle sticker, sales tax is also paid by people who live outside the county but shop in DuPage.

The board is considering approving the vehicle sticker but repealing it before it takes effect if voters approve the sales tax increase in February.

"I think our employees need a little certainty that, one way or the other, we're going to have a revenue source that meets our needs," said board member Grant Eckhoff, R-District 4, of Wheaton.

By the numbers

\$25 million Estimated annual revenue from vehicle sticker

800,000 Number of vehicles in DuPage requiring sticker

60 Expected percent of compliance

1/4 cent Proposed sales-tax increase

\$40 million Estimated annual revenue from increase