

DuPage employees rally for a tax hike

By Marni Pyke | Daily Herald Staff

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Momentum is growing for asking voters Feb. 5 to approve a sales tax-increase to ease DuPage County's budget crisis.

That momentum received a push Tuesday by more than 150 people, mostly county employees, who rallied outside the DuPage government center Tuesday to encourage elected officials to put the question on the ballot.

But several county leaders cautioned that a "Plan B" is still needed to avert massive layoffs in case the request flops.

"My grave concern is what happens the morning after should this referendum fail," board member Linda Kurzawa said.

As a result, pressure will be on board members to either adopt an alternative source of revenue, such as a vehicle sticker tax, or to come up with another plan to avert the so-called doomsday budget.

The budget calls for layoffs of 235 employees, mostly in law enforcement, to address a revenue shortfall. If voters approve a quarter-cent sales tax boost, from 6.75 to 7 cents, it would generate more than \$40 million a year to be used for public safety.

"We're not here to rally to protect ourselves, but to protect the people we serve," State's Attorney Joseph Birkett told a crowd of workers. "The challenge is on our county board to adequately fund our justice system. Public safety and the quality of life in this county depend on their actions."

Many people at the rally included sheriff's police, workers with the state's attorney's and circuit clerk's offices and probation officers.

"I'm out here because I'm disappointed in the county board for letting this lag on," circuit clerk's office employee Tom Grimston said.

The county board is expected to hold a special meeting Thursday to talk over the budget and possibly vote on the referendum.

Another alternative is establishing a \$50 vehicle sticker fee, which could generate about \$25 million. Officials last week discussed the idea of instituting the vehicle sticker fee as a stopgap measure and eliminating it -- if the sales tax hike passes.

But the fee is proving to be a hot potato.

"Certainly a lot of people are in favor of putting the public safety tax on the ballot. Not as many are in favor of a vehicle sticker tax," county board Chairman Robert Schillerstrom said.

At \$376 million, the 2008 budget is \$52 million less than this year's. The corporate fund, which includes salaries for most employees, is set at \$132 million, a \$9.5 million decrease from 2007.

The board must adopt a budget by Nov. 30.

"If the board doesn't pass a budget, government will stop," Schillerstrom said.

The problem facing officials will be how to account for a referendum request that may or may not succeed.

"You can't budget money you don't have," Schillerstrom said. "If they don't pass the vehicle sticker tax, there's no other revenue. You can't presume the referendum will pass."

The county's finance chairman, Pat O'Shea, is among those finding a vehicle sticker unpalatable.

"I will vote for the referendum for sure but I'm not ready to vote for the vehicle sticker at this time," O'Shea said.

Board member Jim Zay backs the referendum plan but has qualms about charging people \$50 a car.

"It's not like when I was growing up and families had one car," Zay said.

Schillerstrom has said for a public safety sales tax hike to pass, the board will need allies such as Birkett and Sheriff John Zaruba to throw their support behind it.

Birkett said he is up for the challenge and told workers, "It's up to all of us to ask voters to do the right thing."

But the state's attorney couldn't resist a brief critique of the county board's previous practice of reducing property taxes "despite a looming revenue crisis."

Schillerstrom countered that "it's easy to be a Monday morning quarterback."

"At the time those decisions were made, there was more money than was needed to operate the county government."

Earlier at the county board's regular Tuesday meeting, numerous speakers appealed to officials to avoid layoffs and budget cuts.

Esther Bahema, a former youth home inmate who has turned her life around, said county counselors and probation officers can't be valued enough.

"They really do care," she said. "They don't judge you because you're locked up."

Wheaton College professor Gary Burge recalled how his daughter, Grace, had a troubled youth and spent months in the youth home.

"She would tell you that the probation department changed her life," Burge said. "They taught her what 'normal' is."

Veronica Porter, president of the DuPage County Historical Museum Association, said the threatened closure of the museum because of the money crunch would be detrimental to a building named one of the 150 most beautiful in Illinois.

"Once it's gone, it's gone," she said.

Birkett leads protest against cuts to DuPage Co. safety agencies

November 14, 2007

BY PAIGE WINFIELD Staff Writer

A job instead of jail. That was the trade-off for Grace -- the daughter of a professor at Wheaton College -- who spent 18 months at the DuPage County Juvenile Detention Center.

Grace was sexually abused until age 4, when Gary Burge and his wife adopted her from China. Beginning at age 12, Grace had frequent run-ins with police and was arrested at 15.

After spending 1½ years at the Juvenile Detention Center, she disappeared when she turned 18. Burge said she called him about a year later from a bus stop in downtown Chicago and told him she wanted to come home and live a "normal life."

Now 21 years old, Grace is married and has a steady job. Burge says she attributes her turnaround to the detention center.

"She'll say it was the training at the center that taught her what normal was," Burge said. "We have the best juvenile training program in the entire state. She came into that program in handcuffs ... she came out ready to be an adult."

Praise for program

Former detention center residents joined Burge at Tuesday's county board meeting to praise the services offered by the center, which is slated to lose staff members under next year's stretched county budget.

"Over there, people really care, they don't judge you because you're locked up," said a 24-year-old named Rachel, who spent time at the detention center as a teenager.

The outcries against cuts to the program continued at a noon rally outside the county complex. A couple hundred county employees -- mostly prosecutors, probation officers and sheriff's police -- gathered to listen to State's Attorney Joe Birkett protest 235 layoffs proposed for the county's public safety agencies in 2008.

"Investigations of crime, our prosecution efforts, defense of the indigent, a safe and secure jail, diversion and rehabilitation programs will all suffer unless a new revenue source is immediately identified and implemented," Birkett said, surrounded by Circuit Clerk Chris Kachiroubas, Chief Judge Ann Jorgensen and other elected officials.

Discussion continues

County board members will convene in a special session Thursday to discuss whether to pursue one or both of two new revenue options that each would bring the county about \$25 million.

Although a vehicle sticker tax is the only revenue option that does not require legislative or voter approval, board members are reluctant to make drivers purchase \$50 stickers for their cars.

But it also is doubtful whether voters would approve a quarter-cent sales tax if the county board placed it on the February ballot. Some board members say the referendum certainly will fail, while others give it a 50 percent chance of passing.

"I think it's tough to get any tax increase," said board member Tom Bennington of Downers Grove.

"(But) I would lean more towards the 50/50."

Hundreds rally for sales tax referendum

By Dan Petrella, dpetrella@mysuburbanlife.com
GateHouse News Service
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DuPage County, IL -

A lunch-hour rally Tuesday attracted hundreds of DuPage County employees who hope the County Board will give voters a chance to save their jobs.

About 200 people gathered outside the county government complex in Wheaton to urge the board to place a referendum on the Feb. 5 primary ballot asking voters to approve a quarter-cent sales tax increase. The revenue would fund the county's law enforcement and judicial departments.

County Board Chairman Robert Schillerstrom proposed a package of budget cuts that would reduce county spending in 2008 by about \$50 million and cost 235 county employees their jobs.

The board will vote Thursday on the proposed referendum and another proposal to create a \$50 county vehicle sticker fee. Either new tax would bring in enough revenue to avoid the proposed cuts, county officials said.

Many present at the rally were employees of the sheriff's office, the state's attorney's office, the circuit court and the probation department, all of which stand to lose employees if the chairman's budget is approved. The sheriff's office alone would be forced to fire about 100 workers.

State's Attorney Joe Birkett addressed the crowd, asking the board to place the referendum on the ballot and urging the county employees to work on their own time to garner support.

"I've been talking about this and advocated about this for years to the County Board," Birkett said after the rally. "Unfortunately, it's fallen on deaf ears."

The board created the budget crisis by continually reducing its property tax levy a decade ago, even as it saw expenses rising, Birkett said. With hope gone that the Illinois General Assembly will give the county authority to institute a cigarette tax, he said it is time for the County Board to act.

The board is considering both approving the vehicle sticker and placing the referendum on the ballot. If voters approve the referendum measure, several board members have suggested repealing the vehicle sticker before it takes effect.

"It's a no-brainer to put it to the voters," said board member Michael McMahon, R-3rd District, of Hinsdale, who serves as chairman of the county's Judicial and Public Safety Committee. He supports approving the vehicle sticker and repealing it if the referendum measure passes, he said.

Board member Thomas Bennington, R-3rd District, of Downers Grove said he is unsure of how he will vote on the two proposals. He wants to see more analysis of how the vehicle sticker program will operated, he said.

The county must approve a budget before Saturday, Dec. 1, when its 2008 fiscal year begins. Without a new revenue source, cuts will have to be made, officials have said.

150 workers lobby for DuPage Co. to hike sales tax for public safety

By Marni Pyke | Daily Herald Staff

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Prosecutors, sheriff's police and probation officers mostly populated a crowd of more than 150 at the DuPage County government complex today to protest budget cuts.

The proposed county budget calls for layoffs of 235 employees, mostly in law enforcement, to address a revenue shortfall.

"We're not here to rally to protect ourselves, but to protect the people we serve," State's Attorney Joseph Birkett said.

One alternative to the so-called "doomsday budget" is holding a referendum in the Feb. 5 primary and asking voters to approve raising the sales tax a quarter-cent to fund public safety. This would net more than \$40 million annually, an option Birkett said he would back.

"It's up to all of us to ask voters to do the right thing," he said.

The county board is expected to hold a special meeting Thursday to talk over the budget and possibly vote on the referendum.

"I think we'll put it on the ballot, and then it's up to the people to decide," county board Chairman Robert Schillerstrom said following the rally.

Another alternative is establishing a \$50 vehicle sticker fee, that could generate about \$25 million. Officials last week discussed the idea of instituting the vehicle sticker fee as a stopgap measure and eliminating it -- if the sales tax hike passes.

But while momentum for a referendum is growing, support for a vehicle fee is iffy among board members.