

DuPage County sales tax hike up to voters

By Marni Pyke | Daily Herald Staff

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In a short but far from sweet meeting Thursday, DuPage County Board members agreed to let the public vote on a quarter-cent sales tax increase to fund public safety in the Feb. 5 primary.

But the more controversial alternative to solve a looming budget fiasco -- a \$50 vehicle sticker fee -- went nowhere.

Some had argued that the unpopular vehicle sticker fee was a safety net that could be enacted and then rescinded if the sales tax request failed. However, in an 11-7 vote, the board tabled it.

That leaves Chairman Robert Schillerstrom with one of the toughest challenges of his political career and a budget revolt on his hands.

"This doesn't resolve anything," Schillerstrom said, noting that it would be "irresponsible" to consider the referendum revenues a given.

"We still have to pass a budget and we have less than two weeks to do that."

The chairman's so-called doomsday budget calls for 235 layoffs and program cuts to balance the books. The 2008 budget is \$50 million less than the 2007 fiscal plan.

The board has until Nov. 30 to vote on the budget, but a majority of board members have said they won't support it as it stands. Meanwhile, some officials are seeking to hold a special budget meeting Tuesday.

"The chairman's budget is off the table. Doing nothing is off the table," board member Paul Fichtner said.

The sales tax could generate between \$44 million to \$45 million annually compared to the vehicle fee, which was estimated to bring in \$25 million. Currently, most DuPage residents pay a sales tax of 6.75 percent.

If approved, funds will be directed to law enforcement.

Tax increase proponents will have their work cut out for them. The approaching holidays will absorb voters' attention, and there are concerns that low voter turnout during primaries, even with a presidential election, doesn't favor tax increases.

"There's a lot of work that needs to be done to convince voters that a public safety tax is necessary," said State's Attorney Joe Birkett, who has pledged his support.

Board member Michael Connelly cast the sole vote against the referendum.

"It's premature. We have not vetted the budget line item by line item," Connelly said. He was still hopeful the General Assembly might pass its own sales tax to fund the RTA or a cigarette tax that would generate revenues.

Several officials contend the county's financial situation isn't as dire as it appears.

Board member Jim Zay said there are many unanswered questions about the budget. He estimated funds are still available to avert layoffs.

Schillerstrom disagreed.

"I think they're just deluding themselves if they think they can pass a budget with the revenues we have without making cuts," he said.

Zay made the motion to delay a vote on the vehicle sticker. "If we had the votes to pass it, it would have come forward," he said.

But others, even on opposite sides of the issue, said it deserved a roll call.

Board member Debra Olson said the fee "would hurt people on fixed incomes and was more of a short-term solution." But "I thought we needed to deal with it," she said.

Board member Linda Kurzawa, who called the fee a necessary evil, speculated that politics played a role in the vote.

"This is just about getting past the primary," Kurzawa said. "I'm disappointed it got tabled."

While Schillerstrom said he believed the vehicle sticker was dead, others said it still had a little life.

"We can decide on a vehicle sticker at any time," Fichtner said. "We can decide on it the day after the referendum if it fails."

DuPage parks plan for vehicle fees in neutral

By Joseph Sjostrom

Tribune staff reporter

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DuPage County residents who own a car or truck won't have to pay \$50 a year for a vehicle sticker -- at least for now -- but they will be asked to vote on increasing the sales tax by a quarter percent in a February referendum measure approved Thursday.

At a special meeting, the DuPage County Board delayed by a vote of 11-7 a decision on the vehicle fee. The vote to put the sales tax proposal on the Feb. 5 ballot was 17 to 1. Both plans were efforts to resolve a financial crisis threatening the jobs of more than 200 county employees.

With a Nov. 30 deadline looming for approval of the 2008 budget, the job cuts look more inevitable. The tax proposal is iffy, at best, said board Chairman Robert Schillerstrom, and comes too late.

"Many referendums fail, some pass," he said. "There is no simple answer out there that will forestall substantial layoffs."

Some board members wanted time to consider alternatives other than the unpopular vehicle fee. While there was no discussion Thursday, board members expressed reservations, saying it would be costly to administer, unlikely to cover more than 60 percent of vehicles and be disproportionately burdensome to those with lower incomes.

It was estimated the vehicle fee would raise \$24 million a year, while the higher sales tax would bring in an estimated \$40 million annually. Neither would cover the \$52 million shortfall that finance officials said the county would have for 2008 than in 2007. But Schillerstrom has said either would reduce the need for layoffs.

Board member James Zay of Carol Stream moved to approve the vehicle fee, and after it received a second, he immediately moved to table it. Zay then moved to adopt an ordinance putting the sales tax increase on the Feb. 5 ballot. After the motion was seconded, Schillerstrom called for a vote, which passed the measure overwhelmingly. Michael Connelly of Lisle was the lone "no" vote, saying there hasn't been sufficient discussion of funding and spending alternatives and that it is premature to talk about a new tax before the board has been able to examine other options.

Several others, including Zay, have complained they have not had an opportunity to review the budget in detail. He said he and at least five other board members signed a form that calls for a special County Board meeting on Tuesday morning to discuss the budget.

The board and its Finance Committee have conducted many meetings on the budget proposal, which Schillerstrom released on Oct. 15. After Thursday's meeting, Schillerstrom said he has no objection to more meetings.

Donald Puchalski, a board member for the past two years, said he was dissatisfied with the budgetmaking process.

"Two or three years ago we were fine. Now all of a sudden it's doomsday, and we have to close the county clerk's office for part of the week and cut 104 people from the sheriff's office," he said. "I would like to have seen a budget with Plan A, Plan B, Plan C rather than one budget and being told, 'This is what it is.' "

DuPage County collects a one-quarter percent sales tax countywide, and an additional 1 percent in unincorporated areas. The additional tax, if approved by voters, would not be imposed on the sale of groceries, medicine and medical devices.

Total sales taxes vary from one municipality to another. For example, in the DuPage County portion of Aurora, in the Route 59 commercial corridor, the total state, county and municipal sales tax is 7.75 percent. In Oak Brook, the total sales tax is 7.0 percent and will increase to 7.25 percent on Jan. 1. The new tax would boost those rates one-quarter of a percent.

Proceeds from the proposed tax would, in theory, be spent only on public safety functions, such as the Sheriff's Department and the courts. But officials have said if the tax is approved, then revenue from other sources now applied to public safety would be spent on other departments.

Rising costs and stable or declining revenue have forced the county into a succession of austerity budgets that included the loss of 40 jobs in 2007. Of the 235 jobs slated for elimination for 2008, The Sheriff's Department would lose the most positions, with 104, followed by the Probation Department with 29. The court clerk would lose 18 and the state's attorney's office would have to cut three positions.

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Robert Brandt

Even while DuPage County is facing a "doomsday" budget, County Board Members themselves are doing quite well.

They pay themselves \$48,620 a year (with automatic pay raises to \$53,645 by 2010) for part-time work i.e. attending two or three meetings a month.

They also have a retirement plan that pays them 80% of their part-time salary after 20 years of service.

And until voters in DuPage County say enough is enough and start voting incumbents out of office, County Board Members have no reason to stop enriching themselves at taxpayer expense.

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