

Work to avert another budget crisis

Published: 11/17/2007 10:47 PM

The DuPage County board made the right choice to seek voter approval of a sales tax hike to bolster the county budget, because there is really no other choice.

A \$50 million county budget shortfall is not fiscal fiction. And the absence of new revenue could be a staggering blow to the county's law enforcement system.

Ultimately, the board preferred seeking a quarter-cent increase in the county sales tax to creating a new \$50 county vehicle sticker fee. It will get more revenue with the sales tax while avoiding a potential administrative nightmare in collecting fees from vehicle stickers, which are not popular with the public in the first place.

Not that voters are necessarily going to be enthusiastic about approving a higher sales tax in a February referendum. It's going to be a tough sell.

But there are arguments that could be persuasive. First and foremost, the critical need to prevent weakening of a dependable system of investigating crime and prosecuting criminals.

Beyond that, the county could argue that it would have no choice but to initiate a vehicle sticker fee in the absence of a sales tax hike.

And while the county board's decision to continue cutting property taxes even after it was financially unwise to do so is now coming back to haunt them, the county did, after all, cut property taxes. For several years. What other governing unit can say that? That should be a good selling point for a higher sales tax.

Even so, any voter-approved sales tax revenue won't come in time to balance this year's battered budget.

But we would hope the easing of this county budget crisis is accompanied by government reforms that could help keep costs under control over the long term.

For one, the county government surely cannot expect public support of new taxes without making changes in generous county salaries and pensions.

To its credit, the county board, a few years back, cut the size of the county board. Still, we don't think the public needs to be paying for a county board consisting of 18 members. Most people probably don't even know who their county board member is, so we doubt they would feel disenfranchised if their county board district would be represented by, say, two members instead of three. Nor would they object to the large cumulative savings in compensation that would come over time with a smaller county board.

And we would again point to cost control recommendations made by the Civic Federation, including looking at consolidating the county clerk and recorder of deeds offices.

If the county government is seeking other ways to streamline operations, it could look to a number of private companies that have been forced to make management changes to firm up their finances in a tough business market. It's a painful process, indeed. Not at all like merely raising taxes to cover the costs of government business as usual.