

DuPage County to huddle again on budget

By Marni Pyke | Daily Herald Staff

Published: 11/17/2007 12:36 AM

After weeks of drama over the so-called doomsday budget, DuPage County leaders will gather Monday at noon to try to resolve their differences.

Board members voted Thursday for Feb. 5 referendum asking voters to increase the sales tax a quarter-cent.

But since that revenue isn't guaranteed and the county needs to pass a budget by Nov. 30, the pressure is on officials. They need to either pass Chairman Robert Schillerstrom's doomsday budget, which calls for 235 layoffs, or come up with a modified plan.

The fiscal plan reduces the corporate fund, the county's main operating fund that pays for most employee' salaries, by \$9.5 million.

As of Friday, however, there was no clear consensus on how to stop the budget car from driving off the cliff.

Board member Bob Schroeder was spending the day "trying to talk nine board members into not making cuts until the Feb. 5 decision."

"We could carry a three-month budget without making cuts until the voters decide," he said.

The longtime board member called job losses, cuts to the health department and DuPage Convalescent Center and law enforcement "the worst experience I've had in 19 years."

Meanwhile other board members contend the solution has been there all along.

Board member Jim Healy said he believes financial planners were too conservative in their estimates on revenues.

The projected \$9.5 million shortfall in the corporate fund could be closer to \$5 million or \$6 million, he said.

And if the board considers adjustments such as 2 percent across-the-board cut in commodities, it's possible to close the gap without cutting sheriff's department jobs, he said.

Board member Brien Sheahan favors an overall temporary salary reduction of 2 percent to 3 percent for both county workers and elected officials.

And if push comes to shove, Sheahan said, funding the sheriff's department and state's attorney's office must come first.

"Those programs with a lesser priority will not be funded at the same level," he said.

But board member Pam Rion said she doubts there's any miracles out there and regretted the fact officials didn't pass a \$50 vehicle sticker fee Thursday.

While recognizing the fee wasn't a great option, "it was the only thing in our authority to do," Rion said.

As for the potential for extra revenues lurking out there, she commented, "our numbers are due out soon, I don't expect they'll be good."

Surprisingly, the prospect of a sales tax increase didn't set the phones ringing at the Naperville Area Chamber of Commerce.

While acknowledging that "any change in sales tax creates additional pressures" for businesses, Executive Director Mike Skaar said he hadn't received any complaints.

Skaar supports giving people a choice.

"This is about taxpayers deciding what county services they want. I think people are beginning to realize government services are not free," he said.

The 2008 budget is \$50 million less than this year's version, including the \$9.5 million drop in the corporate fund. About \$33 million of that difference comes from the transportation department, which has been spending down funds that accumulated while capital projects were being paid for by bonds.

The board will hold a second budget discussion at noon Tuesday.