

DuPage board to scrutinize budget

Goal is to avoid county staff cuts

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Facing a two-week deadline to pass next year's budget, DuPage County Board members next week will begin a "line-by-line" examination of the spending plan in search of ways to avoid some of the deep staff cuts that are being threatened.

"We'll start at Page 1 and go from there," said board member James Zay of Carol Stream, one of a few members who asked for special meetings Monday and Tuesday. "We'll be asking, 'What's this for, and why do we need that?'"

Zay and some board members have questioned the proposed austere budget, which provides for \$52 million in spending cuts and layoffs of some 235 county employees, including more than 130 in public-safety jobs.

The county board voted Thursday to put a question on the Feb. 5 ballot asking for a one-quarter percentage point sales tax increase. DuPage now collects a one-quarter percent sales tax countywide and an additional 1 percent in unincorporated areas. If voters approve the measure, the sales tax increase would raise an estimated \$40 million per year for spending on public safety.

But election experts have advised county officials in the past that success of a tax increase referendum depends on a well-organized, well-financed public education campaign. State's Atty. Joseph Birkett said Friday he expects a campaign organization to take shape soon consisting of himself and officials from the sheriff's office, the County Board and the county judiciary. Birkett said they cannot spend public funds on the campaign and county employees cannot take part during hours when they are working for the government.

Board Chairman Robert Schillerstrom and county finance officials say rising expenses and stable revenue in recent years have left no alternative to cutting staff, including 102 lost jobs in the sheriff's office, 29 in the probation department and three in the state's attorney's office.

Not all board members agree with Schillerstrom's conclusions, however. James Healy of Naperville said he has spent many hours poring over the budget and believes that restoration of about \$10.5 million will permit core county offices -- such as the state's attorney's and sheriff's -- to retain all or most of their employees.

Asked where he might cut from Schillerstrom's proposed budget, Healy pointed to the Public Health Department. "This is not a service mandated by law," Healy said. "These are services the state has cut and so we pick up the ball. Well, at a certain point you have to turn back to the state and say, 'We can't afford it.'"