

County Board delays 'doomsday' budget effects

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DuPage County, IL -

The DuPage County Board approved drastic budget cuts and layoffs Tuesday but voted to delay making the cuts until February, when voters will be asked to approve a sales tax increase.

The board voted 12-6 to approve the \$375.9 million budget, which will reduce county spending by about \$52 million and lay off 190 employees, most of them in law enforcement and judicial departments.

County Board Chairman Robert Schillerstrom's original budget proposal called for 235 layoffs, but several workers have left since it was announced. Their unfilled positions will be eliminated.

Board members and finance officials have said the cuts are necessary because county expenses continue to rise while revenues remain stagnant.

"The bottom line is if you don't have money, shouldn't spend it, and that's what this board decided," Schillerstrom said. "At the end of the day, (passing the proposed budget) was the only responsible thing that could be done."

Earlier in November the board placed a referendum on the Feb. 5 primary ballot asking voters to approve a quarter-cent sales tax increase. Officials estimate the tax would raise \$40 million annually, which would be used to fund the county's public safety operations and free up other money to be used in all county departments.

At the same time, the board decided not to impose an annual \$50 vehicle sticker tax, which would have generated about \$25 million annually and prevented cuts, officials said.

If voters approve the tax increase, the board will reconsider the budget in February to determine how to allocate the new revenue.

Some board members objected to the idea of holding back cuts, saying it would send mixed signals to voters and further the county's financial problems if the referendum measure fails.

"I think we're sending the wrong message to the voters who have to vote on this referendum," said Board Member Paul Fichtner, R-1st District, of Elmhurst. "If they see us doing our part, they'll do their part."

But others said layoffs should not be used to make a point to voters.

"I believe you have to show respect to your employees," said Donald Puchalski, R-1st District, of Addison. "These people cannot be easily replaced."

The board also approved a hiring freeze and a ban on out-of-state travel for county employees, excluding those in law enforcement.

Board member James Healy, R-5th District, of Naperville, offered a series amendments to the chairman's budget, but the board defeated it. The amendments would have restored \$6 million in spending, but left a \$2.5 million deficit. He said that board would have had to find a way to make up that gap.

Healy believes some of the county's revenues were underestimated, but finance officials said their projections have proven to be very accurate in the past.

The board had to approve a budget before Saturday, when its 2008 fiscal year begins.