

200 job cuts depend on DuPage Co. sales tax vote

By Marni Pyke | Daily Herald Staff

Published: 11/28/2007 12:52 AM

DuPage County leaders are hoping voters will save them from doomsday.

A majority of board members Tuesday approved a budget that would cut about 200 jobs, eliminate programs in areas such as public health and close the DuPage County Historical Museum.

But officials also agreed to delay the impact of the so-called "doomsday budget" until after the results of a Feb. 5 primary referendum on raising the sales tax by a quarter cent. Such an increase would generate more than \$40 million annually.

Board member Grant Eckhoff voted for postponing layoffs but warned it was "a big shot of Novocain" and officials couldn't rest and assume the sales tax request would succeed.

Board member Pat O'Shea said "it was irresponsible to fire employees when we still have a revenue source."

But board member Jeff Redick cautioned that not putting cuts in place would put the county at a disadvantage if the sales tax hike isn't approved.

"We need to look at this and the potential hole it will put us in," he said.

The board also voted to institute a hiring freeze in 2008 and restrict out-of-state travel.

During a freewheeling discussion, officials toyed with the idea of slashing the health department levy by \$3 million after hearing it had a cash reserve of \$20 million this fall.

"I don't see how you can cut 100 sheriff's deputies and have no cuts at the health department," board member Brien Sheahan said.

Board member and health board chairman Linda Kurzawa said the department's funds go up and down and \$20 million is not indicative of the reserves on hand consistently.

"Three million is a travesty," she responded.

But officials did agree to a proposal by Kurzawa to move \$600,000 from the health department's revenues to fund mental health programs, emergency management and Access DuPage, an organization that helps residents without medical insurance.

The proposed 2008 budget is \$9.5 million less than the 2007 version in the corporate fund, which pays for most county salaries.

Board member Jim Healy proposed his own fiscal plan that found extra revenues in the budget so that the gap between 2007 and 2008 was only \$2.5 million.

Financial staff members and some board members disputed his calculations.

"There are significant differences, and I do not agree with the revenue estimates," Chief Financial Officer Fred Backfield said.

Board member Paul Fichtner said, "I know the holiday season is before us because we have Santa Claus before us."

Healy also tried to put a \$100,000 grant back into a household hazardous waste facility in Naperville, which the county subsidizes. Chairman Robert Schillerstrom ruled him out of order, saying the board had already voted on that issue.

Several residents questioned the proposed budget. Dirk Enger, co-chairman of the Midwest Shelter for Homeless Veterans, suggested the board reduce its salaries and benefits.

"I ask you tonight to lead by example," Enger said. "Leadership starts at the top. I ask you to look at yourselves."

Board member Debra Olson raised the issue of reducing salaries, but board members took no action.

DuPage Historical Museum Society President Veronica Porter said the institution in Wheaton was trying to raise money by renting out space, but since news of the budget cuts came out, potential clients stopped calling.

"You have put us in a holding pattern," Porter said. "We need the time to put these plans in place. Putting these plans in place will save the museum."