

## Budget cuts on hold until February

### Board will wait to see if sales tax referendum is approved

November 29, 2007

By Paige Winfield Staff Writer

WHEATON -- DuPage County's doomsday budget is poised for implementation - but board members plan to hold off on it until mid-February. The County Board approved 17 to 1 this week a 2008 budget that slashes spending by 12 percent and calls for 235 layoffs over all departments. But it also approved an amendment that postpones all cuts until after the Feb. 5 primary.

If voters approve a quarter-cent sales tax referendum, the county will receive an additional \$25 million that would render budget cuts unnecessary.

If the referendum fails, the budget cuts immediately will be implemented. Judicial and public safety agencies stand to lose \$6.7 million, while education, health and human service departments will see their budgets slashed by a total of \$2.5 million from the corporate fund.

Three board members opposed delaying the cuts. Paul Fichtner of Elmhurst said voters need to see the consequences of the county's budget problems before they will approve a sales tax increase.

"We're sending the wrong message to voters," he said. "It's not going to help the referendum any. I think it's financially irresponsible to be spending at current levels when we know we'll be having a deficit."

The county has available the additional \$2.5 million it will cost to delay layoffs for 2 1/2 months, said County Board Chairman Robert Schillerstrom. Board members Tom Bennington and Jim Healy have uncovered an additional \$1.2 million in revenue, he said.

The board also passed Tuesday evening a 2008 hiring freeze that will provide another \$1 million. The hiring freeze applies to all departments except for transportation.

Schillerstrom said that, although he is upset by the severe budget cuts, the County Board was right to avoid spending money it did not have.

"I think it was the only responsible thing, at the end of the day, that could be done," he said.

The county's next task is to convince voters to approve the sales tax referendum - but the campaign cannot be funded with county dollars. At the most, the county could send out fliers that educate voters on the pros and cons of passing the referendum, Schillerstrom said.

Schillerstrom said he also will refocus his energies on gaining home-rule authority for DuPage, allowing the County Board to levy a cigarette tax without gaining permission from Springfield. Cook is the only county in Illinois with such authority.

"I really want to address the home-rule issue because it's the long-range solution," Schillerstrom said. "We're bigger than seven states. It's ridiculous that we don't have home-rule authority."

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