

No leader yet for DuPage tax push

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DuPage County voters may have the final say on whether the county cuts 240 jobs next year. But a day after the County Board passed its 2008 "doomsday" budget, it's still unclear who will be in charge of a campaign to convince voters a tax increase is in their best interests.

The County Board passed a moratorium that will prevent any job cuts until after the results of a Feb. 5 referendum seeking to add a one-quarter percentage point to the county sales tax.

State's Atty. Joseph Birkett said a campaign is in the very early stages of getting organized but said he hoped leadership will come from the office of County Board Chairman Robert Schillerstrom.

Schillerstrom, however, has said he expects leadership to come from Birkett and the heads of other county offices that will be hardest hit by the layoffs, particularly the sheriff's and state's attorney's.

"We need a bandleader and nobody has stepped to the podium yet," County Board member Linda Kurzawa of Winfield said.

If the increase is approved, the new tax will raise about \$40 million per year in additional revenue -- enough to hold county employment at roughly the present level.

If the measure is rejected, the layoffs will be implemented.

But even with an active campaign behind it, a tax-increase referendum plan faces a dubious future.

"Referendums in DuPage County have a tough time when they involve a tax increase," said Pat Durante, chairman of the Addison Township Republican Organization. "The outcome depends on who's pushing it, the effort that goes into it and the importance of the issue.

"I don't see the township party organizations coming out for or against it. We'll provide the voters with any information that's given to us and let the people decide," he said. "If [the party opposes] it, we're against public safety. If we promote it, we're for higher taxes. We're damned if we do and damned if we don't."

The referendum measure could face another obstacle, Durante said: voter apathy.

"We keep our ears pretty close to the ground, and no one is making my phone ring on this subject," he said.

DuPage County now collects a one-quarter percent sales tax countywide and an additional 1 percent in unincorporated areas.

The 18-member, all-Republican board voted 12-6 Tuesday night to approve the \$375.9 million budget that reduces county employment by 240 jobs in all departments, including 104 in the sheriff's office, 29 in the probation department and smaller numbers across most county departments.