

Ready to get out the word

DuPage officials pushing tax hike

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It's not clear if DuPage County Board Chairman Bob Schillerstrom will drive and State's Attorney Joe Birkett will put up the referendum signs this January.

Or if Birkett will take the wheel, while Schillerstrom pounds the signs into the snow banks.

But it's definite the two will take their referendum show on the road in early 2008.

The task isn't easy -- convincing DuPage voters to support a quarter-cent sales tax increase on the Feb. 5 ballot.

The extra revenue, estimated at \$40 million annually, will be used to fund public safety.

Birkett and Schillerstrom have had their political differences over the years. But they're teaming up at the eleventh hour as the county faces a budget crisis.

Board members Tuesday approved a "doomsday" budget that calls for laying off about 200 workers and cutting programs, such as an urgent dental clinic for low-income people, in order to balance the books.

The budget passed with the proviso that reductions wouldn't happen until the outcome of the February referendum was known.

"The problem is, we've been so wrapped up in the budget. Now we've got to jump on this," Schillerstrom said.

An organizational meeting is planned for early this week.

"He's got some ideas and some people," Schillerstrom said of Birkett. "I've got some ideas and some people."

Birkett said he's already been shoring up support among police chiefs and mayors.

"I've been pushing this for four years," he said. "But now doomsday's here and it's crisis time."

Winter campaign

Brook McDonald knows a thing or two about referendum campaigns.

The head of the Naperville-based Conservation Foundation helped orchestrate the DuPage County Forest Preserve's successful \$68 million open space referendum in 2006, as well as others in Kane and Will counties.

"One thing they have going for them is that it's not a property tax. Being a sales tax, it allows for people outside the county to pay for it, and that's a nice message to get out to people," McDonald said.

But organizers will have their work cut out for them with a short campaign season, made even shorter by the holidays.

DuPage voters traditionally don't like tax-increase referendums, and that goes doubly for the more conservative crowd that often shows up in primaries.

This election, however, "is different because it's a presidential primary. Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama will

draw a lot of nontraditional voters out," McDonald said.

"The high-frequency voters tend to be more conservative. In this primary, the low-frequency voters will come out more than usual."

For the 2006 open space referendum, proponents sent out two mailings, held numerous public information meetings and spent two months organizing the effort.

Success didn't come cheaply. A mailing reaching 45,000 to 50,000 households cost about \$25,000.

Schillerstrom and Birkett each have pledged start-up funds for the campaign.

But the key will be getting others vested in the success of the referendum to help out.

"I've been talking to rank-and-file law enforcement -- they are fully supportive," Birkett said. "Members of the bar association have said they will be supportive, not only with their voices but their pocketbooks."

The state's attorney said if he puts his heart into the referendum effort, he expects county board members to do the same.

"There are no excuses," Birkett said. "I've sent a memo explaining they are free to promote the public safety referendum on their own time as long it does not involve taxpayer money."

Referendum proponents likely will find a useful ally in the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees.

About 130 members of AFSCME are willing to help campaign.

"We're chomping at the bit," said DuPage probation officer and AFSCME Local 3228 President Dana Andrewson, "whether it's going door-to-door with fliers or putting up signs."

December will be a planning month, Schillerstrom said, noting that it makes no sense to campaign during Christmas.

After that, "people of this county are smart, they are willing to spend their money for good causes and it is our job to let them know this is a good cause and a good investment of their money."

Follow the money

The county's budget crisis comes from a variety of sources, including flattening revenues from sales taxes and fees, low returns on investments and the loss of \$15 million in money from the DuPage Water Commission. The county board also did not levy to the maximum amount it was allowed earlier this decade, which reduced the available property tax pool.

Meanwhile, operating costs, including those for health care, continue to grow.

To avoid red ink, the corporate fund budget for 2008, which pays for most salaries, was \$9.5 million less than in 2007.

And in 2007, the county also went through a round of layoffs, reduced its subsidy to the health department and DuPage Convalescent Center by \$4.2 million, cut the sheriff's office by \$2.5 million and reduced human service programs by \$1 million.

But if the tax increase provides an extra \$40 million a year, could officials end up with excess funds?

"We have to show the money will be wisely used," Schillerstrom said. "There's no doubt we need \$10 million right off the bat. And 2007 was a substantial cut budget of its own."

"It will cost us a fair amount of money to get back to what we thought were appropriate levels."

Birkett said his office already was understaffed before the budget cuts started.

"We never had a fat budget," he said.

New revenues could mean the reinstatement of programs, such as the Sheriff's Work Alternative Program, that lets offenders do public service instead of jail time, Schillerstrom said.

"My belief would be if sales tax brings in extra money, we would go back to try and cut the property tax," he said.

"Or, say, if fines and fees are proving to be unfair and onerous, maybe you go back and review those and cut back in some of those areas.

"If we have extra funds, I'll figure out a way to give it back to the taxpayer."