

Board's next task: Convince the voters

Issue whether to increase sales tax and save budget, or face cuts

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By Paige Winfield Staff Writer

Dozens of public safety officers and other DuPage County employees may be looking for new jobs two months from today.

That's how long county officials have to convince voters to approve a sales tax increase. Voters will decide the fate of a tax-increase referendum on Feb. 5, and if it is approved, the county will avoid making 12 percent cuts across the board.

Although it had to approve the 2008 budget by Dec. 1, the County Board agreed to delay all cuts until after the primary.

If the referendum passes, sales taxes will increase from 6.75 percent to 7 percent and the county will receive an additional \$25 million next year to fund the sheriff's office, state's attorney and circuit clerk's office. If it fails, the corporate budget will be cut by \$10 million, more than 200 employees will be laid off and almost every county department will have to tighten its belt.

Officials have yet to declare a campaign plan to publicly promote the referendum, even though they were advised last winter that they should begin educating voters a year before the election if they had any hopes of making it a success.

Former state Sen. David Sullivan told a County Board committee in January that it would likely take at least a year and cost \$250,000 to \$750,000 to adequately educate voters so they would vote for the proposed quarter-cent tax increase.

Talking strategy

Public safety officials met to strategize for the first time Tuesday, almost three weeks after the County Board voted to place the referendum on the primary ballot. With only two months before that vote, any tactics they choose will have to be done with either public funds or their own private campaign funds, State's Attorney Joe Birkett said.

"County campaigns generally begin much earlier," he said. "We don't have the time to raise the kind of money we need."

Although state law prohibits using public funds to advocate for or against any candidate or proposition, it does allow such funds to be used for publishing factual information and distributing the information to voters.

Birkett said it would be "perfectly appropriate" to use county dollars to educate voters about the referendum, but some board members said they feel that would be edging too close to the line.

"I think it's dangerously close to a problematic area when you use any government funds for a political process," said board member Jeff Redick of Elmhurst. "There are a lot of people out there, and there are a lot of resources available that would consider going after before I would use government resources."

Brien Sheahan, also of Elmhurst, said he opposes using public money to convince voters to increase taxes.

"I think the county has to be very, very careful about spending taxpayer money on anything that will be perceived to be a political effort to get this referendum passed," he said.

Mike McMahon of Hinsdale said he doesn't have a problem with board members producing informational materials with county money. But he is looking for public safety officials to take a bigger leadership role in the campaign, especially Sheriff John Zaruba. While Zaruba has said he supports the sales tax, he has been significantly less vocal than Birkett.

"I'm still looking for Zaruba to step up to the plate," McMahon said.

Birkett said he resents board members who say the heads of DuPage's public safety agencies - including Chief Judge Ann Jorgensen, Clerk of the Circuit Court Chris Kachoroubas, and

himself - carry most of the responsibility to campaign for the referendum. It is the County Board that allowed the budget to reach a point of crisis, and now members need to work just as hard as safety officials to promote the referendum, he said.

"The County Board put themselves in this position," Birkett said. "For them to tell us we have to do the work, I'm disappointed. I'm not asking that they do all the work."

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Five major cut areas

1. Public safety and courts, 2007: \$67.3 million; proposed 2008: \$60.6 million; dollar difference: -\$6.7 million; percent difference: -11 percent

- 181 employees will be laid off, including probation officers, prosecutors and sheriff's officers.
- Special prosecutions units will be understaffed, including the gang prosecutions unit.
- Courtrooms will be understaffed and three traffic courts in the county will close.
- Offenders will have less access to crime-preventing probation services, thus putting more strain on the sheriff's office.

2. Health and Human Service and Education; \$8.2 million; \$5.7 million; -\$2.5 million; -30 percent

- Seven employees will be cut from human service and psychological service programs, which provide treatment for domestic violence offenders and substance abusers.
- Funding will be cut from Access DuPage and the Convalescent Center.
- The Regional Office of Education will lose staff members who certify teachers, train bus drivers and check schools for safety.
- Free breast and cervical cancer screenings and dental services for the under-privileged will be terminated.

3. General services, including treasurer, auditor, recorder, clerk, finance: \$65.7 million; \$65.7 million

- The DuPage Historical Museum and the University of Illinois Extension will close.
- 46 employees will be cut from administrative agencies, including the treasurer, auditor, recorder and clerk.

4. Stormwater: \$21.7 million; \$17.5 million; -19 percent

- Continue to keep all capital projects on hold.

5. Transportation: \$74.3 million; \$41.2 million; -\$33.1 million; -44 percent

- Cash reserves will be used for capital projects, indicating difficulties in funding future congestion relief.