

Forest district tax hike to pay for hefty raises

Chicago Sun-Times, January 9, 2005, by Steve Patterson

Cook County Board President John Stroger wants to increase property taxes to cover a Forest Preserve District budget that includes double-digit raises for some district workers and 5 1/2 percent raises for most. The move to hike property taxes by 13.6 percent comes to cover \$61 million in spending that includes:

*A salary for chief attorney Robert Kinchen that is 21 percent higher than his predecessor's.

*A 12 percent jump in salary for Joe Bishop and Sam Simone -- two politically connected aides to the district superintendent.

*No raises for electricians, plumbers or police sergeants.

*\$3.6 million to hire consultants for capital improvement projects and \$5 million more for vehicles.

*No money for toboggan slides.

"There is just no case being made for the additional revenues they say they need," said Laurence Msall of the Civic Federation. "What justification is there for such a substantial tax increase?"

District spokesman Steve Mayberry defended the budget, saying about two-thirds of the district's 489 employees will get a 5 1/2 percent cost-of-living increase -- their first such hike in three years -- and will also get a 4 percent or 5 percent "step" increase -- given for longevity.

Errors to be corrected

Many have criticized the one-two punch that means for taxpayers, including Stroger, but nothing has been done to take it away.

While Mayberry said Stroger "is committed to looking at eliminating the combination of the two in the future," nothing has been done since last year's budget battle, which included similar complaints.

Asked about even steeper raises reflected in the budget, finance chief Lenny Moore conceded Friday that the budget proposal includes

several salary errors and vowed they'll be corrected before final passage.

Still, members of the Friends of the Forest Preserves cite the budget's increases in spending for volunteer programs and programs to improve district land, and Supt. Steve Bylina's openness to change.

Budget not 'mission-friendly'

Benjamin Cox, the group's president, called it "a very good budget overall," adding they know Bylina "is really fighting an uphill battle with making positive changes."

Still, critics expressed concerns about a budget that includes an 80 percent increase for office supplies at district headquarters and a 68 percent increase in training for the financial staff.

Commissioner Forrest Claypool said it is irresponsible "to seek such a huge property tax increase from hard-pressed homeowners" to pay for what Commissioner Mike Quigley called "not a mission- friendly budget," with too much money for managers and not enough for "guys with shovels and women with picks."

As Stroger takes this budget to taxpayers for public hearings this week, he does so with the support of most commissioners -- including Joseph Moreno, who wanted to pass the budget without any scrutiny at all.

PUBLIC CAN HAVE A SAY

Hearings are set for the public to comment on the Cook County Forest Preserve District's 2005 budget, which will increase property taxes by 13.6 percent:

WHEN WHERE

6:30 p.m. Wednesday Skokie courthouse, 5600 Old Orchard Rd.

6:30 p.m. Thursday Maywood courthouse, 1500 S. Maybrook Dr.

6:30 p.m. Jan. 20 Markham courthouse, 16501 S. Kedzie Ave.

10 a.m. Jan. 31 Cook County Building, 118 N. Clark, Chicago