

Will McHenry County raise its property tax levy? Divided board must decide – but no vote before election

Taxpayers should pay less after officials remove mental health levy

By Claire O'Brien October 07, 2024 at 9:46 am CDT
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The McHenry County Administration Building in Woodstock on Monday, Nov. 20, 2023. The county board is reviewing the budget. (Gregory Shaver/Gregory Shaver)

A divided McHenry County Board will be taking up whether to approve a small tax increase and fund three new sheriff's deputy positions.

Although taxpayers should see relief on the county portion of their tax bills after leaders upheld their pledge to remove the almost \$11 million previously allocated to the Mental Health Board, some on the board have floated more cuts.

Last week, the County Board was introduced to the 2025 budget proposal and reviewed several scenarios, ranging from cutting the levy an additional 3% to maxing out on new growth and the consumer price index, a gauge of inflation that this year is 3.4%.

At the committee meeting, board member Terri Greeno, R-Crystal Lake, said there is not a need for new growth or an inflation-tied tax cap increase in this year's budget.

"We could do a 3% cut this year," Greeno said.

Last week, board member John Reinert, R-Crystal Lake, also said he supported not taking the full increase allowed under the tax cap.

At last year's budget vote, Greeno brought forth a proposal for a flat tax levy. That failed by one vote, while the County Board passed a small tax increase by one vote.

"We have to advocate for our taxpayers. That's what we're doing here. That is our job as the board – to level this out," Greeno said Thursday.

Greeno ultimately voted against advancing the 2025 budget and levy in front of the full board and was the sole "no" vote on the finance committee. County documents indicate that the levy is currently almost \$65 million, lower than last year's almost \$73 million. This year's proposed levy captures new growth and part of the CPI. The proposed levy is down about \$8 million from last year largely because of the reduction in property taxes for mental health

services. That money was replaced by a quarter-cent in sales that was approved by voters in the March primary and went into effect July 1.

Board member Brian Sager, R-Woodstock, said that “all of us, I think, have a stake in this,” adding that it’s “incumbent” on the board to keep in mind the strain of the economy on residents and businesses. Sager noted that the county is in the business of providing services.

“The thing that the county provides are services, which are demanded by the public at large,” Sager said, adding that the county has a duty to provide the services but also do it in a fiscally responsible way.

Sager said the county has to cut where it can, but also not cut essential services. He said the demand for services and the cost of providing them will continue to rise, similar to the grocery store or hardware store.

Perhaps recognizing the divided board, Sager said the County Board is a “long way from putting a ribbon on this package.”

Board member Carolyn Campbell, D-Crystal Lake, said there were 10 years of “no.” In the fiscal 2023 budget vote, the County Board approved a tax increase for the first time in a decade.

“We talk about ... the gas tax, the motor fuel tax. We got ourselves into that position because we spent 10 years of no,” Campbell said.

In those 10 years, the county kept putting off things such as equipment purchases, Campbell said.

“When we keep saying ‘no,’ there are consequences. We need to be fiscally responsible. Nobody wants to say ‘yes,’ but if we say ‘no’ too many times, we end up costing taxpayers way more than if we just make sure we’re maintaining what we need,” Campbell said.

Campbell said the county was talking about shoring up the levies to ensure it can support salaries and other expenses. Campbell said the county was “way behind” on state’s attorney and public defender’s offices salaries. Earlier this year, the County Board approved salary increases for the offices.

Campbell added that the McHenry County Sheriff’s Office has worked to keep the same level of service despite not having the deputy staffing it needs. This year, the sheriff’s office asked for funding for three new deputy roles, and many board members have expressed their support for the roles.

“I think this is an important thing that we need to be funding right now,” Campbell said.

The budget and levy will go before the full County Board at its meeting next week, with the budget to go on 30-day review later this month ahead of November’s vote.

The County Board is expected to vote on the budget and the levy in mid-November, just after half the board and the board chair stand for reelection on Nov. 5. McHenry County’s fiscal year begins Dec. 1, and terms for new board members begin Dec. 2.