

Taxing troubles: Dunstan and Prenzler disagree on tax referendum

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EDWARDSVILLE - A new tax referendum being taken to public ballot promises to lower the property taxes of **Madison County** residents, but there is a dispute regarding how much and if it is worth the risk.

Madison County Treasurer Kurt Prenzler (R) championed the tax referendum, which he claims will help lower the property taxes of Madison County residents. The motion

garnered nearly 10,000 signatures. **Madison County Board Chairperson Alan Dunstan** (D) said around 8,300 signatures were required to bring the referendum to a public ballot. He said, however, many of those signatures were given under false presumptions.

"We had people coming in to us saying (Prenzler) told them they would have their taxes cut by 20 percent," Dunstan said. "Wouldn't you sign something claiming your taxes would lower by 20 percent?"

Dunstan said that figure is widely exaggerated. He said the property tax bill for county residents contains only as much as nine percent from the county's general fund. The referendum's reduction, if passed, would account for a savings of approximately \$5.38 for a home estimated at \$100,000.

That small savings, he said, would result in a loss of as much as \$1.4 million for the county's general fund, which is mainly used to fund public safety departments, such as the jail, the state's attorney's office, public defenders and police deputies.

Prenzler, on the other hand, claims Madison County has a gigantic budget surplus, which needs to be addressed. Both Prenzler and Dunstan agreed Madison County had as much as \$143 million in its budget surplus, but each sees it in a different light. Prenzler sees the sum as grandiose.

"We've added a lot to the reserves of this county," Prenzler said. "The purpose of government is not to build excessive reserves. Of course we need money for a rainy day, but we have more than enough to get by."

Dunstan said Prenzler's view on that surplus was "narrow-minded." Dunstan said Prenzler was not taking into account "giant variables" such as Illinois's lack of a budget.

"Sure, we are good financially right now, but what happens when the state wants to send its costs to us?" Dunstan asked rhetorically. "We need to have that surplus for when that time comes, if it does."

That surplus is also not as big as it may seem, Dunstan said. He said other counties of similar size to Madison in Illinois have larger surpluses. He cited the adjacent St. Clair County as having more than \$180 million in its surplus.

Also, he added, the money in those sums is not for liberal use. Dunstan said as much as \$90 million is to be used for specific state and federal programs, and only for those programs.

The purpose of the referendum and petitions, in Dunstan's eyes, is to create a political platform for Prenzler, who is running against Dunstan to become Madison County Board Chairperson in the November elections.

"Every time he spoke about this, he was raising money for his campaign," Dunstan said.

Layoffs and employment reductions were mentioned by both men. Prenzler said the tax referendum would limit the budget surplus without jeopardizing any county jobs or causing any mass layoffs. Dunstan said, if passed, the referendum could place 20-40 public safety jobs in jeopardy.

"Since I took office, we've reduced the number of county employees by 300," Dunstan said. "I am not proud of that number, but we did what was needed to weather the financial crisis of 2008. We're looking at maybe hiring some of those people back, but if this passes, and with the condition of the state, I don't know how we'll be able to do that."

Prenzler said he was able to get signatures from 20 Madison County communities for the petition. He said that representation shows the county residents agree with his notion that the county cannot "tax its way to prosperity."

Both Prenzler and Dunstan agreed the county has been lowering taxes over the course of the last few years, but Prenzler added the county has upped its fees by as much as \$600,000. In a newsletter, Prenzler said the county was padding the budget by as much as \$3-\$4 million in taxes.

Prenzler agreed Dunstan lowered the property tax rate by \$800,000, but said it was simply not enough.

The referendum will go to a public ballot in November, when Madison County voters will be able to choose whether or not it will be implemented into practice.

"I believe the people have a right to petition their government to do more or less," Dunstan said. "I think people also need to be honest with their petitions when they are being circulated."

While Prenzler is a Republican and Dunstan is a Democrat, Dunstan said partisan politics are not the issue at hand. He cited the current budget and constantly decreasing tax levy has been the result of Democrats and Republicans working in tandem.