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1 message

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Thu, Mar 24, 2011 at 7:43 PM

Kane County voters will be asked to fund forest preserve land acquisition

By Clifford Ward
Special to the Chicago Tribune
March 24, 2011

With property values ebbing, it's a good time to buy land for public use. But do recession-weary citizens want their taxes raised to pay for it?

That is what's at stake for the Kane County Forest Preserve District, which is seeking voter approval April 5 to raise taxes to increase its holdings. The district wants to issue \$30 million in bonds to buy land, but says the average Kane County homeowner would see a modest \$13 annual increase on his tax bill if the bond issue is approved.

Forest Preserve District President John Hoscheit said the proposed small increase is by design.

The district realizes times are difficult, but the poor economy has also driven down land costs, giving the district the opportunity to increase its holdings at bargain prices, he said.

"We can get property at 20 percent of what it was a few years ago," said Hoscheit, who stressed that "100 percent" of the referendum proceeds would go for land acquisition or improvement.

With voter approval, the district thinks it will be able to acquire up to 2,000 more acres, increasing its current holdings, which currently number about 19,000 acres.

Hoscheit said he has been speaking to community groups to drum up support, and voters appear more interested after they hear details.

"Once they hear it's not an expansion of government, they become much more receptive," he said.

The Conservation Foundation, a non-profit open space and environmental advocacy group, is helping the district reach out. Foundation President and CEO Brook McDonald said he's spoken to audiences of initially impassive people, and they are usually won over.

"It just makes sense," McDonald said of the proposal. "You can pay a little more now and get a lot, or pay and get a lot less later."

And with Kane's fast growing population, it makes sense to set aside land now, McDonald said. Although forest preserve land is taken off

the tax rolls, in the long run it still is less expensive to taxpayers than providing government services to developed land, he said.

County Board Member Monica Silva of Aurora was one of a handful of commissioners to vote against moving ahead with the referendum. She said she did not dispute the logic behind it and she acknowledged the small increase, but said the current economic conditions made it a bad move.

"The average person is having to buckle down over a dollar here and a dollar there," Silva said.

Additional information about the referendum is available at kaneforest.com, which is the forest preserve district's website. The Conservation Foundation website about the bond issue is at kaneopenspace.org.

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