

Road patrol debate isn't over - Lawsuits, referendum possible over plan to end county subsidy

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On Wednesday, the Washtenaw County Board of Commissioners is expected to approve a controversial plan that would shift virtually all of the cost of sheriff's patrols to local townships and villages by 2008.

But opponents say it won't be the end of the debate over the county's plan to take the money now used to subsidize sheriff's patrols and use it pay off construction bonds for a jail and court expansion project. There have already been threats of lawsuits, and one newly formed group hopes to force a public referendum to stop the county from selling the bonds to finance the project.

The plan to end the road patrol subsidy easily passed its first test last month when it was approved on a 10-1 vote by the county board's Ways and Means Committee, acting as a committee of the whole.

Opponents say they may have since swayed two to four commissioners to join Commissioner Mark Ouimet, R-Scio Township, in opposing the measure when it comes to a final vote on Wednesday, but they are still short of the majority needed to defeat it.

The proposal calls for the county to continue funding a large portion of the cost per deputy for each of the 11 townships, four school districts and two villages with sheriff's contracts for the next two years. Starting in 2008, the county would implement an incremental cost formula requiring local governments to pay the full cost of each deputy and supervisor they hire.

The annual savings to the county - roughly \$5 million per year - would be used to fund the expansion of the chronically overcrowded county jail, construct new courts and enhance programming for inmates with mental health and substance abuse issues.

Without the county subsidy, the townships will likely have to cut the number of deputies they contract for or raise taxes to either maintain the increasing costs of contracts or form their own departments by 2008.

Attempts to have the committee vote reversed or the proposal amended since last month were unsuccessful, officials said.

"We walked away from (the committee) meeting hopeful and encouraged we would have 30 days to work with the county on the proposal, but there has been no collaborative work at all because the bonding resolution cut the legs out from underneath any effort to work together," said Ypsilanti Township Clerk Brenda Stumbo.

Stumbo is among the organizers of the newly formed Citizens to Save Our Sheriff's Department. The group announced this past week that it plans to collect the 15,000 petition signatures of county voters needed by Sept. 25. to force the bond issue for the jail expansion project to a public referendum as early as next February.

The county board has already approved the bonding process and planning is under way.

Stumbo said she's concerned the county is moving forward quickly and asking townships to enter police services contracts without defining which core services, such as SWAT teams, special task forces and the detective bureau, will remain funded by the county.

But County Administrator Bob Guenzel said the amended proposal moved forward the deadline to define which core services are priorities and that it will be up to law enforcement and the local governments to determine those needs. Moving forward quickly is important, he said, because the jail remains chronically overcrowded, people are using courtrooms with limited safety features, and governments need to finalize their annual budgets soon.

"It's unacceptable to be operating how we are for much longer," he said.

Guenzel said he did not expect the petition effort to influence or even delay Wednesday's vote, and organizers of the petition effort said that was not their intent. However, it could be the final opportunity for commissioners to rethink their current course, said group spokesman Chuck Ream, a Scio Township trustee.

"It could be the final chance for the county to drop back and try to discuss this again," said Ream. "If they drop the bonding process then they can go back to the drawing board, but we can't wait for that to happen."

The vote itself could even trigger the first lawsuits regarding the initiative, beginning with the sheriff's department, officials said.

After disagreeing with county officials about the definition of sheriff's services mandated by the state, Sheriff Dan Minzey in May asked the board to provide him with an independent legal opinion. The board denied the request pending official action on the police services issue.

"There are all sorts of legal arguments that could arise after (Wednesday's) vote," said sheriff's Cmdr. Dave Egeler.

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