

## COOK COUNTY TO LAYOFF AND RAISE TAXES



The residents of Cook County are about to get a double dose of bad news. The kind of bad news that they really do not need, or want, to deal with in the current economic downturn. This double dose of bad news comes in the form of a layoff and a tax increase, leaving some of them without income and the rest of them shouldering the burden of government expenses at the same time. Toni Preckwinkle, the Cook County Board President, have proposed a budget that will both add tax increases, calls for cuts in the public safety departments and removes over 1000 workers from their jobs. The proposed changes are designed to help close a hole in the Cook County budget. The hole in question has grown to \$315 million. The plan calls for a proposed revenue increase of \$52 million, which will come from a combination of increased taxed on commodities such as cars, beers and tobacco and a new fee of \$4.75 for parking at the county courthouses. Making up the rest of the shortfall will come from laying off the custodial staff of the county. Instead of the county workers who are being laid off the county will privatize its custodial services. The other half of the shortfall plan is let some of the offenders out of the Cook County detention centers. While letting go of custodial workers may not sound like a big problem, but it will actually represent the loss of about 1,057 county jobs. Then, there is one other area that the county needs to deal with. The funding cuts to Cook County hospitals. The plan will reduce the funding to the Cook County Health and Hospital System. The system, which currently services a fair sized population of low-income and uninsured patients, will have its funding take from the current level of \$276 million to only \$252 million dollars next fiscal year. Though Preckwinkle swears that this reduction in funding should not have a negative impact on patient care. The budget shortfall will come from renegotiating supply contracts. Toni Preckwinkle had this to say to the Cook County commissioners in a meeting on Tuesday, "I said that it wouldn't be easy, and I've kept my word. There's been nothing easy about this." In addition even the remaining county workers will have some concessions to deal with in order to balance the budget. The union workers are currently in negotiations for changes. Some of the changes that are on the docket include unpaid holidays and perhaps even some furlough days. Negotiations are still in progress; with no word how close they have gotten to reaching an agreement. Of course, there is some hope for the works in this case. In order for these layoffs to go through then the budget will have to be approved before it can be implemented and the pink slips can go out. At this moment no one knows how the board will vote, but some people have already expressed a great deal of skepticism about the budget passing.

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