

News

Macomb County
Office of Public Affairs



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Aug. 8, 2008

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Macomb County may seek millage to help veterans

MOUNT CLEMENS, Mich. – Macomb County voters may be asked to approve a .04-mill increase in property taxes for five years to improve services for a rapidly increasing population of military veterans.

The Community Services Committee of the Macomb County Board of Commissioners on Friday, Aug. 8, recommended placing the millage proposal on the Nov. 4 general election ballot. The final decision on the ballot initiative will be made by the County Board during its meeting at 7 p.m. Thursday, Aug. 14.

“The need for the assistance offered by our Veterans Services Department is growing fast, but the county can’t keep up with demand because of our budget problems,” said County Commissioner Kathy Tocco (D-Fraser), chair of the Community Services Committee. “The .04 mill of tax we propose will bring in about \$1.2 million per year for Veterans Services at a cost of \$4 a year for taxpayers with homes valued at \$200,000.”

The Veterans Services Department works with veterans to make sure they are aware of all federal benefits for which they qualify. The department also helps veterans fill out forms and file them with the federal government.

“Helping veterans obtain benefits obviously helps them, but it also helps our local economy,” said Kermit Harris, the retired Air Force lieutenant colonel who recently was hired as Macomb County’s director of Veterans Services. “In 2008, our department helped 2,646 veterans obtain more than \$2.5 million in federal benefits.

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The federal government estimates that there are more than 100,000 veterans living in Macomb County, up dramatically from 75,000 in the 2000 census. The increase “is directly attributable to current military operations” in Afghanistan and Iraq, Harris said.

“Many of these veterans suffer from physical or mental disabilities related to their military service,” Harris said.

In June alone, Veterans Services had 384 contacts with veterans or survivors about new or existing claims, or federal burial benefits. Because of the high workload and the department’s limited staff, veterans needing help from the office now wait four to five weeks for an appointment.

“For a veteran with a hearing problem, a five-week delay may be an inconvenience, but it could seem like life-and-death for a veteran with cancer,” Harris said.

The millage proposal will provide enough funding for five counselors, three more than the department has now. An additional clerk – there are two now – also will be hired to handle the extra caseload and paperwork. One of the counselors will focus on a much-needed outreach program.

“We hope to reduce the waiting time for an appointment to one week or less,” Harris said.

The Veterans Services Department’s 2008 budget is \$637,000.

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