Board warns of bill's effects

■ Housing plan could be costly

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The DeSoto Board of Supervisors has a message for state legislators: If they approve an affordable housing valuation bill, it could cost the county at least $1 million a year in lost tax revenues.

At its meeting Monday, the board approved drafting of a letter to Mississippi House Speaker Philip Gunn, R-Clinton, and Rep. Jeff Smith, R-Columbus, House Ways and Means Committee chairman, objecting to a Section 42 affordable housing-valuation bill sponsored by Smith. County property appraisers fear the measure's provisions could cost DeSoto and its five cities dearly.

"It's just outrageous," said Supervisor Bill Russell of Walls. "Our legislative delegation unanimously opposes this bill, and they hope it won't get out of committee. I think the author wrote the worst bill he could, figuring at least some of it would get passed. This is really bad, if it goes through."

Developers and advocates for the poor contend the bill's tax breaks provide incentives to build low-income hous-ing; cash-strapped local governments counter that those lost revenues could provide services for all.

Also at the meeting, the board took initial steps toward issuing up to $11.5 million in bonds for facilities.

"We're in very preliminary stages of the bond process," board attorney Tony Nowak said Monday of the plan to fund capital projects, including acquisition of buildings and property. The supervisors approved the Jackson-based law firm of Butler Snow as bond counsel to draw up documents and also endorsed a resolution of intent.

Demery Grubbs, county financial adviser with

Government Consultants Inc. in Jackson, said notice of intent will now be published in area newspapers for three consecutive weeks. He said that while notice and other processes of a bond sale can take up to two years,he expects about a 60- to 90-day lead-up.

Supervisor Mark Gardner of Southaven, board president, said the county has been mum on specific projects because of property acquisition issues: "We don't want word getting out we're after a particular building or property and then someone buys it just to resell it to us at a higher price." He said appraisals are ongoing but expects the county to reveal soon what's planned for new or upgraded facilities — and all with no tax increase.

Grubbs, who also arranges for refinancing of existing bonds, said there was an opportunity in the market regarding 2007 and 2009 bonds, with about $340,000 in rate savings possible on one bond issue alone. "I may be back here at your next meeting with a whole stack of stuff for you to look at," he told the supervisors.

Sheriff Bill Rasco left the meeting happy: The board approved his plan to purchase for $350,000 a 1976 Bell 206BII Jet Ranger helicopter, and for $27,704, a new Chevy Tahoe vehicle for the canine unit. Supervisors also approved $6,429 to fence the impound lot to secure seized cars and trucks."Go buy a helicopter and put up a fence," said Gardner.

"And drive up in your Tahoe," added Supervisor Harvey Lee of Hernando.

"I feel good," Rasco said of the approvals. He said the helicopter, being purchased from the Georgia Highway Patrol, will stay busy "after we fly it back from Atlanta. We'll use it for patrol, drug and narcotics interdiction and search and rescue."

He said money for the helicopter, its price trimmed from $389,000, comes from his department's recent sale of a chopper to DeSoto Parish in Louisiana for some $285,000, with the balance from proceeds of other equipment sales and seizure funds. The Bell helicopter will bring back to three the number in the sheriff's fleet; the others, Rasco said, are military surplus models that can't be sold and one is in need of about $70,000 in repairs.