


## Critics question cost, fairness of free rides

By MICHAEL TARM - The Associated Press

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CHICAGO – Gov. Rod Blagojevich's proposal to make Illinois one of the first states to offer free rides on public trains and buses to senior citizens sounds good, so who, the governor himself has asked, could possibly oppose it?

Plenty of people.

Some critics question the proposal's costs and fairness, while others say it amounts to a naked ploy to win political points by handing out freebies. Still others say it's something they might otherwise support, but they fear the last-minute initiative could lead to the defeat of a funding bill meant to bail out mass transit, which had seemed close to becoming law.

Surprisingly, some seniors are among the detractors.

"Why give all seniors free rides?" asked Helen Paullin, 87, taking a microphone and speaking directly to Blagojevich, who pitched his proposal at her Chicago retirement home Tuesday. "Why not give it to the poor across society?"

At least a few others in the audience of about 30 seniors at Hallmark Retirement said they thought it was unfair they should get free transportation when they can easily afford to pay.

That's been a leading cry of critics.

"Seniors are probably the best off of all of us," said Jim Tobin of National Taxpayers United of Illinois. "They don't have that many expenses, their medical services are subsidized, many are on social security, and they have lots of equity. ... And the costs of this proposal are now going to have to be made up by raising fares on less affluent people."

Blagojevich said he opposed the core provision in the funding bill that calls for a .25 percent increase of the Chicago-area sales tax, saying he would only agree to violate a long-standing no-new-tax pledge and sign the bill if lawmakers approve his free-rides amendment. The General Assembly could vote on the amended bill as soon as this week.

In front of a mostly supportive audience on Tuesday, Blagojevich told Paullin he would have liked to expand the benefit immediately to other groups struggling to make ends meet.

"Public transportation in a perfect world should be there for everybody and ought to be free for everybody," he said. "That's not realistic and it's not going to happen, not in my lifetime. But why not begin with our seniors. ... I hear you, but it's not so bad. Just hold your nose and take a bus for free."

The governor has also taken issue with the characterization of seniors as better off than average. According to the governor's office, the average monthly social security benefit for a couple 65 or older is around \$1,700 a month, and a senior who uses Chicago Transit Authority buses and trains twice a week could save about \$176 a year.

The biggest question mark about the free rides is its cost.

There are around 1.3 million Illinois seniors who live in communities with mass transit, with nearly 900,000 of those in the Chicago area, according to state figures.

The proposal's cost would be between \$15 million and \$20 million, the governor's office estimates. The Regional Transit Authority, which oversees Chicago transit, said the cost isn't clear but could be as much as \$30 million. The CTA has said shortfalls caused by the benefit for seniors could force fare increases in 2009, though it couldn't say by how much.

RTA executive director Steve Schlickman said his agency can cope with the \$30 million expense if legislators approve the nearly \$500 million funding bill.

"We believe the high side ... will not go beyond \$30 million. And that is manageable," Schlickman said.

The bill's defeat would mean doomsday service cuts and fare increase would go ahead on Jan. 20, he added.

Another issue is whether the proposal is as sweeping and all-inclusive as advertised.

It's unclear, for instance, whether the benefit will be transferable between different regions, allowing someone visiting Chicago from southern Illinois to use mass transit here free.

It will be up to the different regional authorities to decide that later, said RTA spokeswoman Diane Palmer. She said the RTA hasn't yet made that decision.

"We're working through that," she said. "Our main goal is focused on getting the legislation passed."

But assessing the value of Blagojevich's proposal shouldn't only be a matter of dollars and cents, said Hani Mahmassani, a transportation professor at Northwestern University.

The free-rides benefit could also entice more seniors to leave their cars at home — potentially reducing road congestion and helping the environment, he said.

## COMMENTS

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