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Illinois lawmakers angrily OK governor's changes to transit plan

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6:36 PM CST, January 17, 2008

SPRINGFIELD, Ill.

State lawmakers staved off cuts and layoffs for one of the nation's biggest mass-transit systems Thursday but did so with sparring that exposed deep divisions between Chicago and downstate and a huge rift between the governor and many lawmakers.

The measure boosting regional taxes to provide more than \$500 million in transit aid passed 61-47 Thursday in the House and 32-19 in the Senate, so it now becomes law.

Gov. Rod Blagojevich applauded legislators for approving his changes, even if they did so unhappily. Transit riders in Chicago were glad to learn there would not be cutbacks but criticized lawmakers for the delay.

"I know it's about funding," said Mike Witiw, 32, a civil engineer from Chicago. "It shouldn't have come to that. There's really no excuse."

The plan increases sales and real estate taxes in the Chicago region to generate transit money. Without the aid, officials were set to slash bus and train routes, raise fares and lay off more than 2,000 employees.

Legislators approved the tax increase last week, but the Democratic governor used his amendatory veto to send the measure back to the General Assembly and demand senior citizens across the state get free rides on their local mass transit services.

Blagojevich's move tried to put lawmakers who opposed the transit bill in a tough position by forcing them to vote against free rides for seniors, a dedicated group of voters.

But his action unleashed a flood of complaints that he endangered the bailout by making last-minute demands. Those complaints dominated Thursday's debate.

Lawmakers of both parties said the free-ride provision was a clumsy attempt by the governor to divert attention from the fact that he was agreeing to a general tax increase, something he had vowed never to do.



"I did not get one phone call in support of the governor's action," said Rep. Harry Osterman, D-Chicago. "I would assume most of the people in the state saw right through his action."

Rep. John Fritchey, D-Chicago, said he was drafting legislation to abolish amendatory vetoes.

"If the governor is unable to play with his toys, we will take his toys away from him," Fritchey said.

Fritchey and other legislators also suggested the measure might be challenged in court as an unconstitutional stretch of the governor's amendatory veto power.

Blagojevich said he understands why lawmakers are upset with him but thinks "some of them need to get a grip."

"I know some of them are angry at me, but they really ought to take a deep breath and stop and look in the mirror and frankly realize what we've gotten done here," Blagojevich said at a Thursday evening news conference outside his Capitol office after the votes.

Chicago Mayor Richard Daley thanked Blagojevich and state lawmakers for approving the plan that he said supplies a long-term funding solution for public transportation and averts a "doomsday scenario" of fare increases, route eliminations and job cuts.

"The service cuts and fare hikes would have had a devastating effect on hundreds of thousands of people who depend upon the CTA, Metra and Pace to live their lives," Daley said at a news conference. "It's a happy day for all of us."

Some legislators complained their seniors wouldn't benefit from the free rides because they only applied to transit services with fixed routes, which are not common in rural areas. They also criticized supporters for adding more expenses to an already cash-strapped transit system.

"Why in the world would you blow a hole in something you just fixed? It doesn't make any sense," said Rep. Mike Bost, R-Murphysboro.

Blagojevich had opposed tax increases such as those in the bill and wanted to divert taxes on gasoline sales in the Chicago area to pay for mass transit. But he said would OK the measure -- after including the free rides for seniors -- in a "spirit of compromise."

Senate President Emil Jones, D-Chicago, was one of the few legislators to defend the governor's change to the bill.

"The only problem with this amendatory veto is that we did not think of it," Jones said.

The House followed the transit vote by approving legislation that would put an income limit on the free rides for seniors and offer the rides to people with disabilities. Supporters said that would focus the benefit on people who most need the aid.

Eligibility would be tied to the state Circuit Breaker program that provides aid with taxes and medication. Senior citizens living alone can qualify if their annual income is below \$22,218.

The Senate did not take up that so-called "trailer bill" before leaving town. Jones said he had a problem with the income limits included in the House measure but intends to solve those when legislators return to work in

February.

"I want to make sure it's right," Jones said. "I want to make sure it's right for seniors."

The governor and lawmakers have debated for more than six months about how to help the struggling transportation agencies. During that time, Blagojevich approved two temporary bailouts, including one \$27 million grant that came from money set aside for other construction needs.

Some lawmakers, particularly Republicans, had wanted to tie a transit bailout with a statewide program for schools, highways and government construction. Blagojevich and lawmakers have been unable to agree on a capital program for five years.

Legislators recently have discussed a plan to expand legalized gambling to pay for a capital program, but the politically volatile proposal will take time to work out.

Associated Press Political Writer John O'Connor in Springfield and Writer Caryn Rousseau in Chicago contributed to this report.

The bill is HB656.

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