

# Revoke free CTA rides for seniors?

## Sacking the program would help prevent \$3 fares, Daley says

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BY **MARY WISNIEWSKI AND FRAN SPIELMAN** Staff reporters

To avoid "very ugly" fare hikes and service cuts on the CTA, Mayor Daley said the state Legislature needs to consider taking back free rides for senior citizens.

"They have to revisit everything," Daley said. "And that is one of 'em they have to revisit. Definitely."

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**Mayor Daley stopped short of giving the CTA fare hike proposal his blessing. The CTA plans to cut service and raise fares as high as \$3 for express bus and rapid transit service.**

*(Rich Hein/Sun-Times)*

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The free ride program was tacked on to the 2008 CTA bailout by former Gov. Rod Blagojevich, and later extended to low-income riders with disabilities, disabled veterans and military personnel.

The CTA figures free rides will cost the agency \$60 million in 2010.

But reversing the senior ride program could be tricky politically -- Gov. Quinn said he still supports it. A bill sponsored by state Rep. Suzanne Bassi (R-Palatine) that would limit senior free rides to low-income seniors is in "limbo," Bassi said.

"I don't see the senior free ride reversal happening, because seniors tend to vote," said Michael Pitula of the Little Village Environmental Justice Organization.

A \$300 million shortfall in the CTA's budget led the agency to propose fare hikes Monday that would increase the cost of an L ride to \$3 from \$2.25 -- the highest among big cities -- and impose steep hikes on passes. The agency also would cut bus service by 18 percent and rail service by 9 percent, leading to more crowded trips and longer waits.

To help avert the steep fare hikes and service cuts, CTA officials are going to Springfield this week to ask to convert part of nearly \$500 million in state capital funding into money for operations. CTA Chairman Terry Peterson said Tuesday he also wants concessions from the agency's unions.

"Maybe instead of a \$3 fare increase on the train we're looking at \$2.75," Peterson said.

But neither job is expected to be easy.

"There's a burden on them to prove to us they've done as much belt-tightening as possible," said state Rep. Julie Hamos (D-Evanston). Hamos said that while the General Assembly wants to be cooperative, "it's not a slam dunk."

As for the unions, Robert Kelly of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 308, which represents the rail workers, said that before he sits down to talk about concessions, he would have to see a long-term solution to the CTA's budget problems.

"If we don't solve the problem, it will be \$500 million next year," Kelly said. "You can't count on the unions to bail you out."

The CTA has blamed the need for fare hikes and service cuts on the bad economy. A 30 percent downturn in sales and real estate taxes has contributed to the \$300 million budget gap for 2010.

The CTA has been able to plug part of that gap with non-union job cuts, furlough days, use of federal capital funds and other measures.

CTA officials said they cannot currently consider alternatives such as charging more for rush-hour fares, or charging more for longer distances, because its fare-taking technology won't allow it. The agency has a proposal out now looking for this type of technology but wouldn't have a pilot program for another two years.

"The CTA should have been looking at zoned pricing years ago," said Robert Paaswell, former CTA chair and now interim president of the City College of New York.

Pitula said transit advocates want to get transit operating funding from Washington with a new transportation bill that would focus more on transit and less on roads.

"We can't continue to treat transit as an afterthought," Pitula said.

**Contributing:** *Kate Grossman*