

# Sweet and sour taste to transit deal

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Gov. Rod Blagojevich had this to say about a pending mass transit funding deal in Springfield:

"What I will do is essentially take what I believe to be a lemon and turn it into lemonade."

It's certainly a sweet deal for those who use the RTA and CTA, at least to the extent that the plan on the table would at last firm up financing of the transit agencies. Riders of buses and trains would no longer have to hear of an approaching doomsday of service cuts. Funds would come from an increase of a quarter of a percentage point in the sales tax across the suburbs and a hike in the real estate transfer tax in Chicago.

Of course Metra commuters might not be too happy with the announcement, a day after the news of a transit funding deal in Springfield, that their fares will be increased 10 percent. But an increase in transit user fees must by fairness be a part of any deal that increases taxes on people who do not use public transportation.

But if lemonade is not made right, it can be pretty bad. And there are parts of this deal that leave a sour taste in our mouths.

We have supported the sales tax and real estate transfer tax hikes as necessary to keep the trains and buses running. And to bolster long-term financing of a public transportation system commuters rely on to get to and from work and other places. But the way the governor approached these tax hikes is perplexing. Blagojevich retreated from opposition to tax hikes he has promised in his gubernatorial campaigns by offering up freebies as a condition for breaking that anti-tax pledge. He'll agree to the tax hikes, he says, as long as senior citizens can ride public transit for free.

Great for the seniors. But that won't come without additional cost. And why should wealthy senior citizens ride at no charge? Where's the free rides for the disabled and the jobless? Shouldn't they also be cushioned from the impact of an increase in sales taxes?

And why didn't the governor long ago offer the free rides as a means for agreeing to tax hikes as part of the negotiating process with legislators, to possibly end contentious debate and get a deal done sooner? Instead, he used his bill amendatory authority to add the freebies after the legislature had already approved a bill to fund transit with tax hikes.

Meanwhile, a badly needed capital improvement program to fix up roads and bridges in the state, which we have also urged be approved, is still nowhere to be found.

The deal also includes another quarter-point sales tax increase for DuPage, Kane, Lake and McHenry and Will counties. The money can be spent on only transportation and public safety. This is good news for DuPage County, where law enforcement agencies are in a budget crunch. If DuPage gets sales tax revenue from a deal in Springfield, it could render moot a referendum on the Feb. 5 ballot that asks voters to approve an increase in the county sales tax. But whenever government gets a new infusion of cash, you wonder if it will be spent on things the public truly needs and not on what government officials want for themselves.

The deal is not done. It has to go back to the legislature for another vote. Certainly local mass transit needs a funding boost. And that needs to get done. But in some ways, this deal is real lemon.