

# State lawmakers approve transit funding plan

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Glen Ellyn, IL -

Chicagoland's transit problems seem to be finally solved.

Both houses of the Illinois General Assembly approved Thursday a \$530 million transit funding package that will keep the Regional Transportation Authority running as scheduled.

The transit legislation was an updated version of a bill that lawmakers passed last week. When Gov. Rod Blagojevich added a concession giving free rides to senior citizens, the measure had to go back to the General Assembly for approval.

Legislators had criticized Blagojevich's last-minute introduction of his free-rides plan, but the funding bill still passed both houses easily.

Now that the funding has been secured, Pace, the Chicago Transit Authority and Metra will be able to operate uninterrupted. The RTA branches had targeted this weekend to unroll widespread service cuts and fare hikes — the so-called “doomsday scenario” — in an effort to save money.

The transit systems were facing hundreds of millions of dollars in budget shortfalls, which were a product of running a growing transit system year after year without a substantial increase in funding.

The transit bill addresses the budget gaps by raising sales tax a quarter percentage point in Chicago and a half percentage point in the five collar counties. The bill also gives Chicago the ability to raise its real estate transfer tax.

Pace Board Chairman Richard Kwasneski said the funding will allow the suburban bus system to pursue its plans to improve and expand service.

“We’re extremely pleased that the legislature has accepted this plan,” he said in a statement.

Despite the new funding, Metra officials have said they will still raise fares by 10 percent beginning Feb. 1.

Approval of the bill essentially makes DuPage County's sales-tax referendum on the Feb. 5 primary ballot a moot point. County Board Chairman Robert Schillerstrom has said he would tell voters to vote against the referendum if the transit bill passed.

County officials have said the quarter-cent sales-tax increase will generate \$40 million annually for DuPage, enough revenue to prevent the board from having to follow through on the personnel cuts approved in the 2008 budget.