



## Senate advances no free rides for seniors

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### GATEHOUSE NEWS SERVICE

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An Illinois Senate committee agrees that blanket free bus rides for seniors should be eliminated.

The Senate Executive Committee voted 8-4 to limit the free rides only to low-income seniors starting March 1. All other seniors could ride buses for half price as mandated by federal law.

Ending the blanket free rides is viewed as necessary to help mass-transit systems in the Chicago area cope with falling revenues. Free rides on those systems for all seniors cost over \$35 million a year. The systems are threatening service cutbacks and fare increases unless lawmakers give them some relief.

Free rides for all seniors have been in effect since March 2008. Former Gov. Rod Blagojevich insisted on the perk as a condition of his support for a mass transit bail-out bill that year.

The Springfield Mass Transit District said that it's issued more than 2,600 ID cards to seniors allowing them to ride for free since the program started. The district pegs the total free rides at over 138,000, costing the district about \$69,000 in revenue. Standard fares on district buses are \$1 a ride, although seniors could ride at half price.

Senate President John Cullerton, D-Chicago, said transit systems in the Chicago area promise not to raise fares for two years if the bill is passed. Senate Minority Leader Christine Radogno, R-Lemont, said the bill "shows we are good stewards by not giving freebies to people who don't need them."

However, Sen. Rickey Hendon, D-Chicago, said government has helped out General Motors and the banking industry, but is now going to "screw the senior citizens."

"We give (seniors) one little perk and now we are taking it away," Hendon said. "We are sticking it to granny."

A House committee approved a similar bill Wednesday. Both the House and Senate must approve one of the bills before it can be sent to Gov. Pat Quinn for his signature.