

Governor talks transit with Northwest Side seniors

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Gov. Rod Blagojevich stopped by Mather's More Than A Cafe, 3235 N. Central Ave., Friday to pitch his proposal of free public transit for seniors to an audience consisting almost entirely of seniors.

Blagojevich announced his intention Jan. 10 to sign a bill that would raise nearly \$500 million for Chicago-area mass transit agencies by instituting a quarter-percent sales tax increase in the six-county area.

He planned to make an amendatory veto, however, that would require transit agencies statewide to allow senior citizens, age 65 and older, to use public transit service for free.

Blagojevich said he didn't want to raise taxes at all but that legislators left him with no choice.

"The choice I have is to take that bill and improve it," Blagojevich said, "or veto it, but if I do that, there's a chance public transit could shut down."

With a transit doomsday scheduled for Jan. 20, Blagojevich came to the Northwest Side Mather's location for the second time as governor, call-

ing on seniors to urge passage of the modified bill.

"It's nice to be back here," Blagojevich said. "There's a new day on the horizon."

Blagojevich was joined by state Rep. Luis Arroyo, D-3rd, state Sen. William Delgado, D-2nd, and Chicago Alderman Ariel Reboyras, 30th Ward who all said they supported the governor.

"I just wish the city council had a vote on this," Reboyras said. "Thanks governor, it's taken a long time (to get a transit bill) but it's been all worth it."

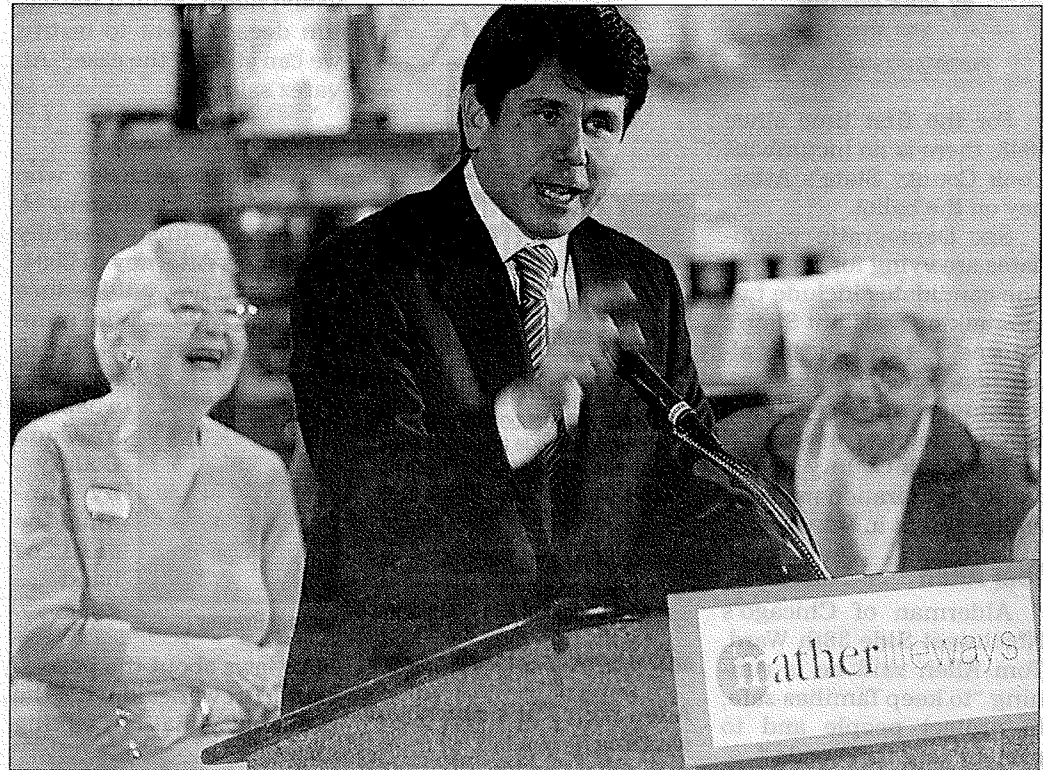
Seniors were wildly supportive of Blagojevich, applauding him and loudly thanking him for his efforts.

"It's better for people who are 90-years-old to take the bus than drive a car," said Theresa Gasiorkiewicz, a Northwest Side resident.

Another cast the riders of public transit into two separate groups: those who use it and those who need it.

"Most seniors aren't taking the bus to go to Starbucks or to go clubbing," said Alberta Matulis also a Northwest Side resident. "It's a necessity for them."

A few questioned why Blagojevich would extend free rides to seniors and not to other groups, like the disabled.



Gov. Rod Blagojevich speaks at Mather's Cafe, 3235 N. Central Ave., about free mass transit for seniors Friday. — Jason Brown/Staff Photographer

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Gov. Rod Blagojevich

"I would like to see the governor give a discount for paratransit," said Janine Ptasinski, a Cragin resident. "I

think he should lower it for them."

That could be in the works: Blagojevich referred coyly to

future initiatives that he would announce a bit later in the year but then went said he planned to put free public transit for the disabled into his budget proposal this year. And eventually, he said, it should go even further.

"It should be something that's free to everyone," he said.

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