



# **Regional Transportation Authority**

## **For immediate release**

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## **RTA BOARD SUPPORTS MEANS TESTED SENIORS RIDE FREE PROGRAM**

*Changing to means-tested program could reduce revenue losses by as much as \$37 million for 2010*

CHICAGO - The Regional Transportation Authority (RTA) Board of Directors today said they support changing the current Seniors Ride Free Program to be eligible only for low-income seniors, after a compelling preliminary study showed that the costs of the current program are unsustainable.

The RTA commissioned a study through the Urban Transportation Center at the University of Illinois at Chicago to examine the long-term effects of the RTA's statutorily mandated Ride Free programs by looking at ridership patterns, surveying travel habits, and reviewing the overall forecast of senior and disabled populations. The results showed that changing the Seniors Ride Free Program to be means tested could reduce revenue losses by approximately \$37 million dollars. The Board hopes legislators will consider adjusting the Seniors Ride Free program to help mitigate the service cuts and fare increases projected in 2010 due to the economic downturn.

"We are losing tens of millions of dollars and we can't afford to lose any dollars when the RTA and its service boards are being faced with a serious budget crunch," said RTA Executive Director Steve Schlickman.

The RTA Board suggests that free rides be reserved for low-income seniors who are enrolled in the State's Circuit Breaker program. Those who do not qualify will continue to ride for half-fare, which is required by federal law.

Currently, State law provides that the People with Disabilities Ride Free Program is limited to people enrolled in the State Circuit Breaker Program.

The study also showed that as many as 50 million free rides were taken by seniors and people with disabilities between March 2008 and June 2009.

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Furthermore, the study examines how both senior and people with disabilities populations impact the current free ridership programs. The study looks at how they impact existing service capacity, including the number of trips taken. A survey was presented to 5,000 seniors to determine whether the implemented Seniors Ride Free program changed their riding habits, covering details including day and time of travel, purpose for travel, and whether they used the reduced fare card prior to the program's implementation. Additionally, the report analyzes demographic profiles and forecasts for individuals 65 years and older, projecting its long term financial impact on the program. More than 1,500 people responded to the survey.

“The demographics of the region indicate the population of seniors will more than double between 2009 and 2030, and the revenue losses will more than double as well,” said Schlickman. “This is something that we need to include in our long-range financial planning to ensure that we are prepared for future ridership demands if the program continues as is.”

The RTA Seniors Ride Free program began in March 2008 under the terms of an amendatory veto by former Gov. Rod Blagojevich. The RTA People with Disabilities Ride Free program began six months later in October 2008. Prior to the implementation of the Seniors Ride Free program, seniors had access to the RTA's Reduced Fare Program which offered them half fares on the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA), Metra and Pace. In April 2009, enrolled seniors needed to transition to a Seniors Ride Free Smartcard if they wanted to continue to enjoy free rides on the CTA, Metra and Pace.

The study shows there was a significant increase in applications for the free fare card. Before the Seniors Ride Free Program was instituted, there were approximately 150,000 enrollees. Currently, there are 350,000 seniors enrolled in the free fare program.

While survey results are still being assessed, tentative results reveal that 28% of the respondents currently use transit one or more times per week, 27% ride transit more frequently as a result of the program, 28% report using cars and taxis less, 13% of survey respondents report taking rides that were work related, while 16% are currently employed.

Finally, based on currently available year-to-date data, the report projects a total annualized loss for 2009 of up to \$112.6 million for both programs, with the Senior Ride Free program accounting for as much as \$76.3 million of the loss and the People with Disabilities Ride Free program accounting for as much as \$36.6 million.

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*About the RTA: The RTA provides financial oversight, funding and regional planning for the three public transit operators in Northeastern Illinois: The Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) bus and train, Metra commuter rail and Pace suburban bus and paratransit. For more information, visit [www.rtachicago.com](http://www.rtachicago.com) and [www.MovingBeyondCongestion.org](http://www.MovingBeyondCongestion.org).*

*The Urban Transportation Center at the University of Illinois at Chicago is a research unit within the College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs. They are dedicated to conducting research and education and providing technical assistance on urban transportation planning, policy, operations and management. They specialize in three*

*core clusters of transportation research: disadvantaged populations and human sustainability, Intelligent Transportation Systems, and public transportation, highways and freight planning, operations and management.*