

November 29, 2007 Thursday

Final Edition

**Gov put Hawks over CTA?; Flies to Chicago before vote; transit bailout falls far short**

By Dave McKinney

Springfield bureau chief

SPRINGFIELD-Was Gov. Blagojevich playing hooky at a Chicago Blackhawks hockey game Wednesday?

Key state lawmakers -- placed by Blagojevich on legislative lockdown at the Statehouse to avert a CTA meltdown -- sure think so.

After being at the Capitol much of the day in pursuit of a mass transit bailout, Blagojevich quietly slipped out of the building with his press secretary and boarded a taxpayer-funded jet to get to the hockey game. He had been invited as a guest of new Blackhawks team president John McDonough.

Blagojevich "went there in his official capacity as governor at the invitation of the president in an effort to promote the Blackhawks," said spokeswoman Rebecca Rausch.

The decision drew scorn and sarcasm for the unpopular, second-term governor.

"It certainly would have shown a little more interest in what we were doing if he'd have stayed in the Capitol," said House Speaker Michael Madigan (D-Chicago).

A proposal to shift more than $400 million in state fuel taxes to the RTA got only 57 votes, 14 shy of the 71 needed for passage. Without new money, the CTA has pledged to cut routes, hike fares and lay off 2,400 employees by mid-January.

Madigan credited Blagojevich for generating only two votes supporting the doomed mass-transit funding plan. Rausch didn't dispute that figure, but she questioned why Madigan didn't twist more arms himself.

"[The governor] put his strongest ally in the House, his floor leader, Rep. Jay Hoffman (D-Collinsville) on this bill, which was a tough vote for him," she said. "We're wondering where Madigan's guys were."

The House vote took place at 8:21 p.m. -- 41 minutes after the puck was dropped in Chicago at the Blackhawks game -- and Blagojevich was observed at the arena's members-only Ketel One Club.

"For us to be in Springfield and waste five, six or seven hours and then the governor leaves is a disappointment," said Senate Minority Leader Frank Watson (R-Greenville), when told by the Sun-Times of the governor's actions. "If he was serious about the special session . . . he should have been here."

The governor intends to fly back for more meetings on mass transit today -- when he ordered lawmakers to be in Springfield.