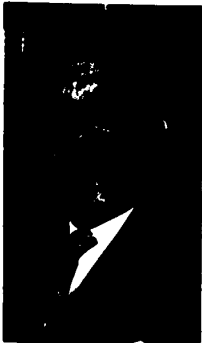


# SEMTA puzzled by transit chief's position



By TIM RICHARD

Public transportation officials here are still scratching their heads in puzzlement over federal policy, even after a visit this week from U.S. Transportation Secretary William T. Coleman Jr.

Will the government decline to fund the Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority's (SEMTA) rapid transit plans until it absorbs the Detroit bus system? Will the Ford Administration seek new funds when the present \$11 billion program runs out?

SEMTA doesn't know.

COLEMAN WAS IN Detroit Monday to address the prestigious Economic Club. With Ford Motor Co. officials literally on one side of him and General Motors officials on the other, the transportation secretary spent the day thinking and talking air bags and other auto regulations.

In a press conference, however, Coleman got a question about reports that his department's Urban Mass Transit Administration (UMTA) wanted to see all bus systems in the region merged prior to the launching of a rapid (rail) transit system.

"That is not our department's position," Coleman said flatly.

Then he added: "It is better if the function is operated by a regional authority." And he promised that "whatever an application is made, we will give it serious consideration."

He revealed that Detroit Mayor Coleman Young was "a drinking buddy of mine" for three years when they were in the military service; that he and Gov. William Milliken were both awarded honorary degrees from Yale University recently; and that Michigan's U.S. Sen. Robert Griffin "seems to get his will worked" in the Transportation Department.

SEMTA OFFICIALS, however, insist UMTA has "pressed" them to acquire the Detroit bus system.

"They have been saying they want it merged," said Marilyn Thayer of Ann Arbor, SEMTA board vice-chairwoman. "Technically, they have not said they couldn't find us if we didn't merge. But we have letters from them over three years. They've pressed us."

"They said it was their policy," added James J. Mullen, a SEMTA board member from Grosse Pointe.

"It's typical of a government bureau," said SEMTA Chairman Joseph Bianco Jr. of Bloomfield Hills. "They stop short of saying it is public."

THERE IS \$2.3 billion left in the rapid transit fund, and agencies around the country have reportedly submitted funding requests totaling far more than that.

Will the administration seek more money from Congress when the money runs out?

"We still have \$2.3 billion left," answered Coleman. "If we feel we haven't accomplished what we want, we'll ask for more."

What about the reports that undated applications add up to far more than the remaining \$2.3 billion?

"No—that's what we have left when all

the applications are taken out," answered Coleman.

SEMTA GENERAL manager Clarence Gomerette, informed of the reply, laughed about it.

"He knows damn well they haven't accomplished all they want to accomplish. What kind of answer is that?"

Gomerette is certain Congress will approve a new rapid transit funding program when the current one runs out. There is just too much demand, he feels.

The southeastern Michigan program is still hanging fire while SEMTA performs

what is called an "alternatives analysis." It means SEMTA must do cost-benefit analyses of different modes and modes of transportation systems—all buses, commuter rail, rapid rail, light rail, and so on.

SEMTA and Detroit's Mayor Young are worried that the paperwork may not be finished before all the money is gone.

ADDRESSING the Economic Club, Coleman said the "first priority is completing the interstate highway system."

To a member's question about rapid transit, he said he was "shocked it costs us 10

times as much to build a subway system as it does in Europe."

He added that before such a system is set up, there should be a commitment from organized labor that it will never be shut down by a strike.

Users should generally be expected to pay the cost of service, Coleman said. "But in urban transit, the public (government) must pay the cost." He called reviving cities the most important domestic problem facing the country and said "a large part of that is a good transportation system."

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