

Transit turns Joe Bianco on

By TIM RICHARD

"After all this 'grantmanship,' people are finally seeing some physical improvements."

Joe Bianco breaks into a rare grin as he talks about the \$23 million in new, air-conditioned buses with bright orange "SEMTA" markings. The first bus shelters he has ever seen and new bus terminals that are going up.

Bianco is chairman of SEMTA, the Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority. Since 1967 he has been deep in the often tedious report writing, bill drafting, committee work, shuffling and cajoling that it takes to translate plans into a system that transports people.

BUT FOR BIANCO, 39, of Bloomfield Hills, the planning is still far from over. He's seeking a new three-year term in SEMTA as an appointee of the Southwestern Michigan Council of Governments. He wants to see a rapid transit system built too.

Bianco gets turned on by the fact that SEMTA is taking over the Grand Trunk Railway commuter service from Detroit to Pontiac, rebuilding old cars and adding service.

From the first he decided, "Public transportation was difficult, challenging, intricate. This is where I could contribute."

"I GREW UP in northeast Pennsylvania, right in the heart of the coal country. In the '50s it was a terribly depressed area—25 per cent unemployment was the norm. I recognized the fallacies of a one-industry town."

The biggest scholarship he could find was to General Motors Institute, where he studied engineering and finance.

"When I took my master's in economics at Georgetown University, I worked on causes of economic development. Some summers I worked at the State Department on designing what we called the economic infrastructure for developing countries."

"It became clearer to me that transportation systems meant, not only to developing countries but to already developed, urban areas."



SEMTA CHAIRMAN BIANCO

"WHEN I CAME back to Detroit in 1964 I worked for the national accounting firm of Touche Ross. I got to travel in western Europe and all over the United States."

There were lessons, many Detroit is years and years behind in transit systems.

Touche Ross did some of the audits and accounting for Grand Trunk and some of the bus companies in the region. As I got to be privy to financial operations, it became clear to me that public transportation was moving quickly to the state of bankruptcy."

In the Greater Detroit Chamber of Commerce, Bianco worked on a committee that recommended the law setting up SEMTA. Gov. George Romney signed the enabling legislation, Act 204, in 1967.

THAT YEAR was significant in another, more depressing way.

"I'm a lieutenant commander in the Coast Guard Reserve," Bianco said. "I was on active duty two weeks during the Detroit riots. Patrolling the river front standing on the bridge in front of Cobo Hall and watching the city burn. I almost cried."

"The day I left the ship, I got a call from Joe Hudson (the retailer) and Kent Matheson (president of Metropolitan Ford) asking me to take part in formation of the urban coalition that became New Detroit Inc. For six months I served as executive vice president."

"We saw the results of Detroit and Watts, and one of the points of feedback was lack of adequate transportation service—job accessibility. Twenty-eight per cent of the households in Detroit had no access to an auto."

Bianco was appointed to the first SEMTA board and became chairman last year.

IN PRIVATE LIFE, Bianco is a vice president of Lomb, Rhodes & Co. in Detroit. The investment banking and brokerage firm claims 90 per cent of his time.

Two days a month, however, there are SEMTA board and committee meetings. There are dinner meetings with legislators, county commissioners, council people, not only on the political aspects of SEMTA but on its future service.

Homework involves studying transit systems and budgets—\$40 million for operations, \$70 million in applications for capital grants.

THE BIG BREAKTHROUGH came three years ago when the state allocated a half-cent of the gasoline tax for public transportation.

"It meant a virtual revolution in bus service," SEMTA has put 14 small bus programs into effect from Monroe to Birmingham, said Bianco, "and in fiscal '77, we're going to install three more dial-a-ride systems."

"In addition to that, we're going to set up seven more small bus programs, essentially to serve the elderly and handicapped in each of the seven counties of SEMTA's authority."

"We've got 300 new bus shelters, the first the suburbs have ever seen. Within the next month, we'll have a \$2 million terminal in Macomb County that replaces a 40-year-old facility. In July we'll be opening up the new Oakland terminal, a \$2.5 million facility that replaces one about 50 years old."

"And we have approval for a new \$2 million terminal in western Wayne County."

Internally, the SEMTA board has wrestled with building a management structure that exploded from eight staff persons three years ago to 60 central staff and 450 operating employees today.

THERE ARE frustrations, he admits. Chief is the "continual bickering" with the City of Detroit over merging its department of transportation (D-DOT) into SEMTA. The D-DOT union chief has been able to delay all capital grants for three to six months, Bianco said.

While the U.S. Department of Transportation won't say so publicly, it wants SEMTA to absorb D-DOT before it will finance a rapid transit program here. These negotiations have been extremely difficult, in Bianco's view.

"The city's constant position is that they always want a little bit more than we can offer."

Meanwhile, however, SEMTA has been able to acquire the failing or failed suburban bus companies without the kinds of lawsuits other metropolitan areas have experienced.

YOU MIGHT EXPECT Bianco to be a hard-sell guy with a touch of the Machiavellian prince about him. Instead he has an air of serene efficiency.

He has solid contacts in both parties. He was once a campaign manager for Republican U.S. Sen. Robert Griffin, and his recommendation to SEMTA has the solid backing of Democratic Alexander C. Perloff, chairman of the Oakland County Board of Commissioners.

Bianco sometimes thinks about turning over the SEMTA reins to others and playing more golf or selling more stocks and bonds.

But the public transportation field provides too much excitement.

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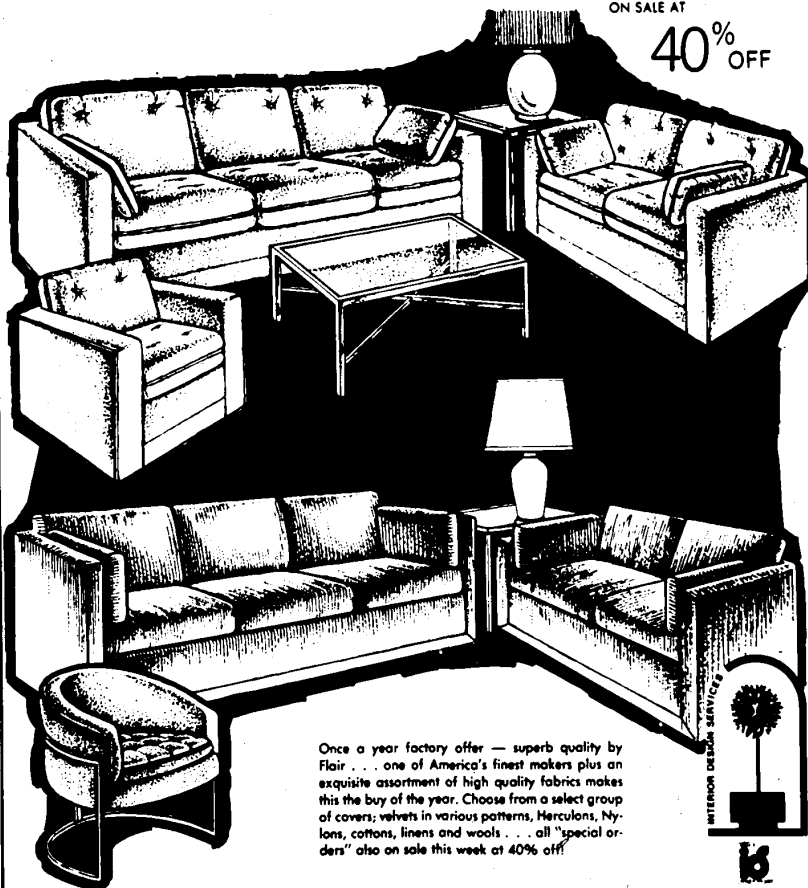
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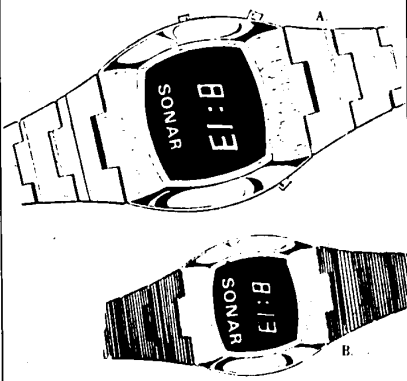
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