



Region's Transit Future Was Bleak Until We Provided Local Leadership

"Help Head Off Area Transit Disaster," urged an Oakland Press headline soon after the Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority (SEMTA) announced its transit plans.

"A subway deficit could hit \$100 million a year in the Detroit area in a quarter century, while realistic ridership projections do not justify investing in much more than improved bus service," said the Oakland Press editorial.

"Detroit Mayor Coleman Young has his heart set on a subway for Detroit. Somehow, some way, Oakland County interests, state interests, and others have got to make him see the light of day," declared the same editorial.

In those few quotes are summarized the reasons the Board of Oakland County Road Commissioners decided in late 1976 to lead the fight against SEMTA's Coleman Young subway. Nobody else was doing it.

State officials were blithely proposing new taxes for Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties that would be poured primarily into Detroit's subway.

The Oakland County Executive, who would be expected to provide major leadership against such a drain of Oakland County citizens' money, was curiously silent. Later, he went so far as to endorse SEMTA plans and praised Young!

Local officials were screaming, of course, but against the powerful Detroit mayor and without backing of their own county's highest elected official, their voices were not strong enough.

Road commissions could provide the leadership. The road commissions of Michigan have a broad responsibility to the public with regard to transportation. In addition to highway and road maintenance, we are deeply involved in comprehensive planning of new facilities to meet

The Picture above depicts a light rail transit vehicle on a busy downtown Detroit street.

public demand. We have competent, professional staff that are highly experienced in public works planning, environmental and social impact analysis, engineering, and in the management of large construction projects.

The Oakland County Road Commission, together with the State Highway Department, cities, and other road commissions, is required by Act 327 of 1972 to "maintain a continuing study of the transportation needs of the state." The Act broadened this responsibility from a study of only highway needs to all transportation needs. The clear legislative intent was that road commissions are required to be involved in overall transportation planning based on relative needs of a balanced system. That study is in process and we have been an active participant. As a matter of fact, the Oakland County Road Commission's Highway Engineer, Paul Van Roekel, is a member of the Michigan Transportation Needs Study Public Transportation Subcommittee.

We are vitally interested in the impact a proposed regional transportation system might have on road needs, and we regularly participate in regional planning processes to alert regional planners to local considerations and to be sure local interests are protected.

When we realized that SEMTA's plans and Mayor Young's influence were ignoring local concerns, we decided to act.

First, in conjunction with adjacent counties, we completed comprehensive studies including population projections, origin-destinations of traffic, and sources of funding. Those studies were done by professional, experienced outside consulting firms.

We knew that SEMTA's plans were based on outdated and erroneous data. We knew SEMTA's plans required huge amounts of new local taxes. But we felt that without independent and thorough outside analysis we would be rightly accused of promoting our own biases.

We were surprised that a good

transit program based on accurate population and origin-destination data could be built within the amounts of money promised by federal and state agencies. No new local taxes would be needed.

Thus, we prepared such a "Tri-County Alternate" transit plan. It made so much sense that for the first time in history several local units of government in Oakland County endorsed a transit plan, the Tri-County Alternative.

We presented this plan to SEMTA, but we were sneered at.

We presented it to the federal Urban Mass Transportation Administration (UMTA), which controls \$600 million of transit funds promised to Southeastern Michigan. UMTA appreciated the Tri-County Alternative and soon after told SEMTA that regional transit plans would have to be supported by local officials including the road commissions.

The voice of local concerns had been raised loud and clear, and it had been heard.

Since then, SEMTA has thrown out its heavy-rail subway transit plan. But, SEMTA hasn't given up on a subway for Detroit yet.

The fact that Mayor Young's campaign for reelection has been based on his record of getting federal money into Detroit may be one reason. Young is taking advantage of all the federal programs that have been allocating money to all major central cities during the past four years.

He doesn't want his campaign for Detroit's votes marred by his failure to grab the lion's share of mass transit money intended for southeastern Michigan.

The Board of Oakland County Road Commissioners intends to continue its lead in the fight for a sensible and affordable mass transit system for all of southeastern Michigan.

INSIDE YOU'LL FIND

- Where your Oakland County Road Commission's money came from, and where it went.
- How the mass transit needs of the tri-county area can be met without new local taxes.
- What it takes to get your subdivision streets improved.
- How to tell the Road Commissioners what you think.
- Highlights of the 1976 and 1977 road construction programs.
- What needs to be done to meet citizens' expectations for roads.
- How chuckhole patching is being improved.
- Why the County's road system keeps getting longer.
- How state roadbuilding impacts on local roads.
- Winter maintenance facts.
- How your Road Commission helps fight high utility bills.
- And more.

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Edition of September 26, 27, 28, or 29, 1977