

SEMTA blasts road commission

By TIM RICHARD

SEMTA has taken off the padded gloves and, in a bare-knuckles barge, accused the Oakland County Road Commission of trying to sabotage public transportation plans in the metropolitan area.

Joseph P. Bianco Jr., a board member of SEMTA (Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority), delivered the denunciation during SEMTA's Feb. 11 public hearing in the Oakland County Service Center.

Bianco, of Bloomfield Hills, was joined by SEMTA Chairman Tom Turner of Detroit and Oak Park Mayor David Shepherd, who is also vice-chairman of the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments, the planning agency that wrote the 1990 plan SEMTA is to implement.

It occurred after William Fognini, a director of transportation planning and environmental concerns for the road commission, accused SEMTA and SEMCOG of "promoting a subway system" and challenged the regional agencies' population and employment data.

"IT'S INTERESTING," Bianco began, straining to retain his temper.

"that the road commission says it's in favor of public transportation but says all the negative things it can find about public transportation."

Referring to the Oakland Road Commission's widely-shown light rail transit proposal, Bianco said:

"Gov. Milliken, Highway Commission Chairman Peter Fletcher and state urban transportation chief James Kellogg 'have categorically denied they ever asked the Oakland County Road Commission to prepare a plan.' (The OCR's presentation says in writing it was asked to do so by the governor's office.)"

"Oakland County Executive Daniel T. Murphy has proposed abolishing the road commission as a separate body and has 'reaffirmed his faith in our ability to run a transit system.' (Murphy has sometimes been critical of SEMTA, but he is even more critical of the road board.)"

"SEMTA has involved the road commission in public transit planning by placing Fognini on two committees, 'but it wasn't until three months ago that you began holding press conferences after a month of research.' He referred to the road commission's transit plan, for which it has invited wide publicity, and to the origin and

destination survey it made in a few weeks last September.

"Statistics which the road commission attributed to SEMTA are actually three years old and not part of SEMTA's alternative analysis."

"The road commission hasn't attended any of SEMTA's public meetings."

Bianco drew the longest burst of applause of the evening when he finished: "We've got the worst roads in the state in Oakland County, and I wish you'd worry about them instead of coming up with a cockamamie transit system."

BOARD CHAIRMAN Turner added that the road commission "assured us they would submit their plan. As of today, we have not received a plan."

The road commission in December presented the same slide show to the SEMTA board as it is showing community groups currently.

"SEMTA's study has been conducted in an orderly, open manner. Unfortunately, I cannot say the same for the Oakland County Road Commission. There was no hint of a private plan (by the road commission) in the planning procedure."

FOGNINI HAD spoken during the public hearing as just one of 23 interested persons.

His remarks repeated the standard road commission position: SEMTA and SEMCOG have always been in favor of a subway; the alternatives analysis is a tactic to make it appear the SEMTA board is really studying other transit modes; SEMTA's data is out-of-date and exaggerates the numbers of trips into Detroit; light rail would be cheaper, take less time to construct and be more flexible than a subway.

The irony is that SEMTA officials think there are real possibilities for light rail in the metropolitan Detroit area. It's even more ironic that County Executive Murphy agrees with the road commission that SEMTA's data may be off but doesn't support the road commission's political views.

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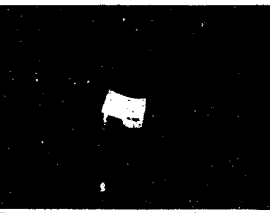
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