

County commissioners say 'So long, SEMTA'

By MICHAEL MATUSZEWSKI

Any plans for a public transportation system serving the entire seven-county region of southeastern Michigan have been placed in jeopardy.

The Oakland County Board of Commissioners last week voted to pull the county out of the regional public transit group, the Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority (SEMTA). The vote was 18-8.

Observer & Eccentric area commissioners voting to pull Oakland County, the wealthiest county in the region, from SEMTA included: Henry W. Hoot (R-Troy), Paul Kasper (R-Bloomfield Hills), Robert McConnell (R-Farmington Hills), Lillian Moffitt (R-Bloomfield Township), Joseph Montante (R-Orchard Lake), Ralph Moxley (R-Birmingham), and Dennis Murphy (R-Novi).

Area commissioners voting to remain in SEMTA were Robert Page (R-Birmingham) and Lawrence Perry (D-Southfield). Page was the only Republican to oppose leaving SEMTA.

Oakland County Executive Daniel T. Murphy has 10 days to veto the decision. The Commissioners will need 18 votes and will have 30 days to override a veto.

INCREASING FRUSTRATION with SEMTA, the state legislature and Detroit Mayor Coleman Young, according to most commissioners, was the key to the decision to drop out of SEMTA.

The idea of withdrawing from SEMTA is not new. Commissioner James Lanni (R-Royal Oak) annually introduces a resolution calling for Oakland County's secession from the regional transportation authority.

That resolution, however, usually dies unceremoniously in committee. This year, though, it made it to the board floor where it won a large, but not overwhelming victory.

THROUGHOUT A long and hard debate, commissioners favoring secession spoke of "sending a message" to an unresponsive, uncooperative state legislature.

Some commissioners favored the idea of using the decision to withdraw as a bargaining tool with SEMTA, the legislature and Young. Commissioners could reverse their decision by upholding a veto by Murphy.

Lanni, who introduced the resolution, said the county wanted certain concessions from Young and SEMTA. "We want Detroit to drop the subway plan," Lanni said.

Murphy, the county executive, said Detroit's mayor has repeatedly said he wants to build a subway in the city of Detroit. He also has gone as far as to say he would pull the city out of SEMTA if he does not get his way.

The city of Detroit, however, need SEMTA and federal dollars to help finance any transportation system.

Oakland County commissioners have repeatedly said they do not tax money collected by SEMTA from Oakland County to finance any subway which would serve primarily the City of Detroit.

According to Mrs. Moffitt, SEMTA collects \$11.4 million from Oakland County through the 1/2-cent gasoline

tax, the tri-county license plate tax and federal taxes, but gets only \$2.5 million back from the transportation authority.

"We're not getting our fair share," she said. "We're just not getting an equitable share of the funds."

Her sentiments were echoed by every one of the commissioners voting to drop out of SEMTA, as well as by those who voted to remain within the regional framework.

"I agree, we're not getting our fair share," said Commissioner Betty Fortino, who voted against secession. "But every body knows that we're not serious about leaving SEMTA. Every body knows that we're holding the executive's veto in reserve. If we wanted to send a message, it's already lost its effect," she said.

"WE'VE WORKED and worked," said Hoot. "We've worked and the county executive has worked with state representatives. We've worked with SEMTA. We've worked with SEMCOG (Southeastern Michigan Council of Governments). And it's gotten us nowhere," he declared. "You can't ride a promise," he concluded.

THROUGHOUT THE long debate, those opposing any withdrawal preached the gospel of regional cooperation.

"We're building a wall around Oakland County," said Commissioner Dennis Aaron (D-Oak Park). "This is sheer parochialism. It will return Oakland County to the days of the horse and buggy. And it will go to show that there are more horses derivatives in Oakland County than horses," he said.

Another point which irritated commissioners favoring withdrawal was the failure of SEMTA to set up a county-wide dial-a-ride bus service. The Oakland County Advance Reservation Transportation System (OCART), a dial-a-ride program, has been stalled for the past 18 months.

SEMTA, however, cannot purchase the needed vehicles because the state legislature will not allow any bus purchases until it decides whether each bus will have to be equipped with special features such as wheel chair lifts, to make make them accessible to the handicapped.

"They're making SEMTA a scapegoat for legislative inaction," said Commissioner James Doyan (D-Royal Oak).

MURPHY, the county executive, did not plead to let cooler heads prevail. Instead he delivered an impassioned, though noncommittal, speech.

He urged the commissioners to send "a strong message" to Lansing. "If your going to send a message, you better pass it with a lot of votes," he said.

While urging commissioners to pass the resolution with more than 20 votes, Murphy admitted that Oakland County could not realistically afford to operate its own transportation system.

"I don't think we can operate our own bus system," he said. "We can't afford to operate our own system and we can't afford to be left out."

AFTER THE VOTE Murphy conceded that he did not think the 18 affirmative votes were enough to "send a loud clear message."

Murphy and the board is expected to be in contact with the state legislature, Governor William Milliken and the City of Detroit within the month. In that time, Oakland County will find out how effective a bargaining tool its withdrawal threat is.

THE WITHDRAWAL VOTE may do more to break apart regional cooperation, though.



Several Oakland County commissioners had a special message for Detroit Mayor Coleman Young.

Following the vote, a number of commissioners presented Larry Sali, SEMTA general manager, with a special message for the Detroit mayor.

Commissioners Kenneth Roth (D-Berkley), John DiGiovanni (D-Pontiac), Niles Olson (D-Pontiac), Hoot and Lanni gave Sali a shovel to deliver to Young. It was emblazoned with the words "If you want a subway—dig it."

"That was just very poor," said McConnell shaking his head. "We have just negated everything we were

trying to accomplish," he concluded. BY WITHDRAWING from SEMTA, Oakland County will forfeit its three seats on the authority's board of directors. SEMTA is currently governed by a 15-man board. Five board members are appointed by the mayor of the city of Detroit. The remaining members

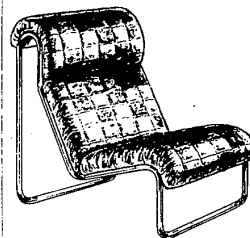
are suburban representatives. SEMTA will continue to collect taxes in Oakland County, even though the county is unrepresented on the board. If Oakland County's decision to withdraw stands, Sali and commissioners said a lawsuit will eventually be filed to settle the tax issue.

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