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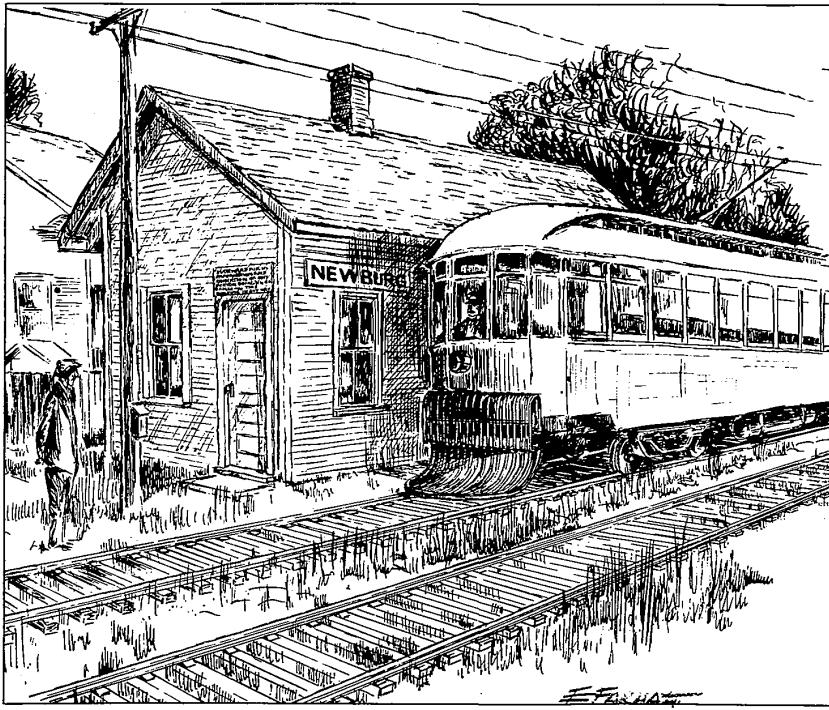


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The Newburg depot, in what is now Livonia, looked like this in 1898 when the Detroit United Railway interurban trolley stopped for passengers. This is from a lithograph by Edward L. Farhat for the Livonia Historical Commission.

Transit today: Reviving interurban

By TIM RICHARD

Public transportation was better in 1907 in the northern and western suburbs of Detroit than it was until just a couple of years ago.

As of 1975, the Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority (SEMTA) began to get a grip on public transportation needs. The near future will see an increased combination of express and local bus service.

This area is unlikely to see anything describable as "rapid transit" before the second decade of the 21st century.

Yet the local transit agencies in the suburbs got their first voice on the SEMTA board. That seven-county agency remains controlled by Detroit, Grosse Pointe and Birmingham-Bloomfield interests. Local politicians are showing only little inclination to change things.

BY 1907 the Detroit United Lines had interurban railway lines radiating from Detroit to Port Huron, Saginaw, Jackson and Toledo, according to William D. Pyle's "Michigan: A History of Wolverine State."

These electric railways were glorified streetcars, but they did the trick in getting passengers between towns quickly and cheaply. The corridors they served 71 years ago are the same corridors under consideration today by SEMTA for rapid transit service—Gratiot, Woodward, Grand River, Michigan Avenue and Fort Street.

The greater irony is that, after considering all kinds of exotic rolling

stock, the SEMTA board concluded that whatever rapid transit the region will get will almost certainly be light rail—the space age version of the interurban.

The interurban companies of Michigan went under in the 1920s and '30s, due in part to the advent of buses and cheap private motorcars. It was a great loss. Sam Hudson's history of Plymouth tells of a community picnic at the state park on Island Lake, near Hudson, which folks reached by taking the interurban. You can't do that by public transportation today, and you won't be able to for quite a while.

TEN YEARS AGO, the Transportation and Land Use Study (TALUS) called for five rail rapid transit lines emanating from downtown Detroit. One was marked for the Schoolcraft Road corridor, with a branch shooting up the Southfield Road corridor to Northland Center.

Hopes of public transit zealots were high, but it was not to be. Cost estimates of underground, heavy rail, rapid transit soared to \$140 million a mile. Leadership projections on several metropolitan Detroit area lines were doubtful.

SEMTA last year opted instead for two light rail transit lines—in the Gratiot and Woodward corridors—and sought to reduce the amount of underground mileage, over the protests of Detroit Mayor Coleman Young.

Meanwhile, federal money almost ran out. The Ford Administration, in

its dying days in 1976, committed \$500 million to SEMTA for less than SEMTA needed to build two lines to Eight Mile Road, let alone to the suburbs and let alone any west side line in the Schoolcraft corridor.

TALUS's successor agency, the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments, dampened west side optimism by revising transit plans to suggest the western suburbs would get no rapid transit before 2000 and 2010. Even that is optimistic.

BUS SERVICE in the suburbs, however, has been making great strides, despite all sorts of obstacles and in defiance of the regional trend.

In 1967, Metropolitan Fund made an inventory of bus systems in the region and found they were carrying a combined 115 million passengers annually. Since then, overall ridership has declined to the 80 million range.

The big loss has been in Detroit, which still operates its own bus system, managed by the city's department of transportation, D-DOT. But in the suburbs, SEMTA, born in 1967, acquired several suburban bus companies and began expanding service.

SEMTA is also supposed to acquire D-DOT, but negotiations with the Young Administration have been protracted.

In 1966, Adolf Schiller's Northville Transportation Co. ran a line from Northville along Five Mile to Grand River. That year it had costs of \$142,000 and revenues of less than

\$100,000 for a loss of \$43,000.

The Great Lakes Line ran a bus from Northville along Eight Mile to Grand River to Five Mile.

Bee Line had a little used service from Plymouth to Eight Mile to downtown Farmington and up Orchard Lake Road to Pontiac.

MOST DRAMATIC step taken by SEMTA has been inauguration of two "park and ride" express bus lines from some suburbs to downtown Detroit. They start:

At West Bloomfield Township's Pine Lake Mall on Orchard Lake and Lone Pine Road, going south on Orchard Lake to I-96 and then to downtown. Eight buses out and seven returning carry 337 daily riders.

In Plymouth Township at Ford Motor Co.'s Sheldon Road plant, stopping at Five Mile-Newburgh and Livonia's Eddie Edgar Arena on Farmington Road, then taking the new (December 77) I-96 freeway to downtown Detroit.

The park-and-ride services were started at the start by Ford Motor Co.'s decision to shift some employees from its Dearborn offices to Detroit's Renaissance Center.

SEMTA spokesman Marvin Meltzer said the staff "is already talking about how to add a fourth or fifth bus" to the western Wayne express service.

IF THE ARTERIES in southeast Michigan have been slow to get

(Continued on page 15)

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