

SEMTA boss politicks to end transit stalemate

By MICHAEL MATUSZEWSKI

While confusion and controversy still swirl around a regional transportation plan, SEMTA General Manager Larry Salci has conjured up a smokescreen that could save face for Detroit and suburban politicians.

Salci's idea, unveiled in an interview last week, is to approve a transportation plan that includes rail service within the city of Detroit and preliminary engineering for a Woodward Avenue rail line. The SEMTA board would

defuse city-suburban hostilities and move ahead with improvements in SEMTA's service.

THE SOUTHEASTERN Michigan Transportation Authority for years has

been trying to come up with a regional public transportation plan that would satisfy the wants of both the city of Detroit and outlying communities. With \$600 million in federal funds waiting in the wings since 1976, SEMTA's 15-member board cannot agree what will be done to carry metropolitan residents into the year 2000.

On April 3, SEMTA's board is scheduled to decide which of seven transit alternatives it prefers.

Salci quickly pointed out that SEMTA's April 3 preference may not be what finally materializes in the form of new buses, commuter trains and light rail rapid transit, either subway or at grade.

SEMTA'S DILEMMA hinges on the future of the Woodward Avenue corridor.

Detroit Mayor Coleman Young wants a light rail, underground, rapid transit line to be built from the foot of Woodward Avenue to Eight Mile Road.

Young and SEMTA officials admit such a subway is an expensive proposition. A regional transportation package that includes the subway could cost more than \$1.5 billion.

Suburban officials, especially those

in Oakland and Macomb Counties, say the money would be better spent on the all-bus alternative — upgrading bus service throughout the tri-county area.

In between are five alternatives proposing different mixes of subway and surface rail running from downtown Detroit to Eight Mile Road.

"I haven't seen a specific plan that the entire (SEMTA) board can rally behind," Salci told a group of reporters last week. "There's been a lot of jostling," he added, referring to recent meetings between Young, Gov. Milliken and Livonia Mayor Edward McNamara, SEMTA chairman.

SALCI'S FACE-SAVING device revolves around the April 3 SEMTA meeting and the approval of any one of the alternatives that includes rail transportation up the middle of Woodward Avenue.

By approving some form of light rail for Detroit, Salci says, the board is merely giving the green light for the preliminary engineering. Following preliminary engineering, he added, there must still be public hearings, final approval by the SEMTA board and a final hurdle in the Michigan Legislature. Both legislative houses, under state law, must approve any transportation

plan that includes rail service in the Woodward corridor.

"Opponents of the subway can go home and say 'It's only preliminary engineering. It doesn't necessarily mean anything.' Coleman (Young) can go back secure in knowing that when there's preliminary engineering, some kind of construction will follow," Salci said.

WHILE PRELIMINARY engineering would give city and suburban officials about 18 months to bridge the rift, it would also give SEMTA time and money to begin other improvements that will be a part of the total transit plan, Salci said.

By finally moving off dead center, the SEMTA board could finally begin tapping the \$600 million pledged by the U.S. Department of Transportation.

The federal funds, Salci said, could be used to buy more new buses for regular bus routes, more vans for local dial-a-ride systems and better commuter rail service between Oakland County and downtown Detroit. "I'll let us get on with the short-term stuff," he said.

"This will give us a chance to improve service, increase regional support, and it will give us a better chance

of getting more money for rail later," Salci added.

BUT SEMTA'S problems do not begin and end with the Woodward corridor. Even though the federal government has promised \$600 million, it is not nearly enough to cover construction of an ambitious rail line. Young and Salci agree that more federal money can be obtained to cover rail construction, but the federal government will only pick up 80 percent of the tab.

SEMTA's current financing system will be over-extended by any transit plan other than an all-bus system, SEMTA officials say. The large one-time, capital costs of any rail system built in Detroit will necessitate a new funding mechanism, they say — and that probably means new taxes.

The funding avenue advocated by Salci will require taxpayer approval. SEMTA officials favor an inflation-proof, elastic tax — a regional sales or property tax. SEMTA now gets about 17 percent of the money raised through the recent increases in state gasoline tax and tri-county license plate fees. Those were approved last year by the legislature.

Shifting to a sales or new property tax would require a regional election.

Rush-hour riders outnumber seats; rerouting eyed

For the Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority, business has picked up to the point where it doesn't know if it can pick up any more — rush-hour passengers, that is.

Ridership, SEMTA officials said, has increased more than 20 percent over the past year.

According to SEMTA General Manager Larry Salci:

- The transportation authority's buses are carrying about 37,000 persons each day.

- Its dial-a-ride vans are carrying another 5,000 persons each day.

- And its commuter trains carry another 15,000 persons.

Most of that business comes during the morning and afternoon rush hours, and Salci said, "We've got a lot of people standing on some of our buses."

THAT'S WHERE the crunch comes, Salci said.

Some bus routes will have to be eliminated to shift buses to the busier routes, he warned. Speaking to a group of Oakland County reporters last week, he declined to name the routes that are being considered.

Salci also said a number of buses in SEMTA's mothball fleet might be rehabilitated and pressed into service to handle the morning and evening crunches.

Despite SEMTA's increasing popularity, SEMTA officials say they will go ahead with a new advertising campaign this spring.

That campaign, Salci said, will promote SEMTA's "non-rush hour" and weekend service.

IN SPITE OF the increased ridership figures, SEMTA is still fielding complaints from dial-a-ride passengers in Oakland County.

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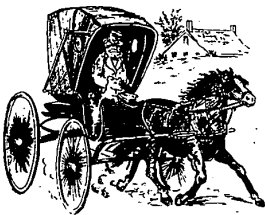
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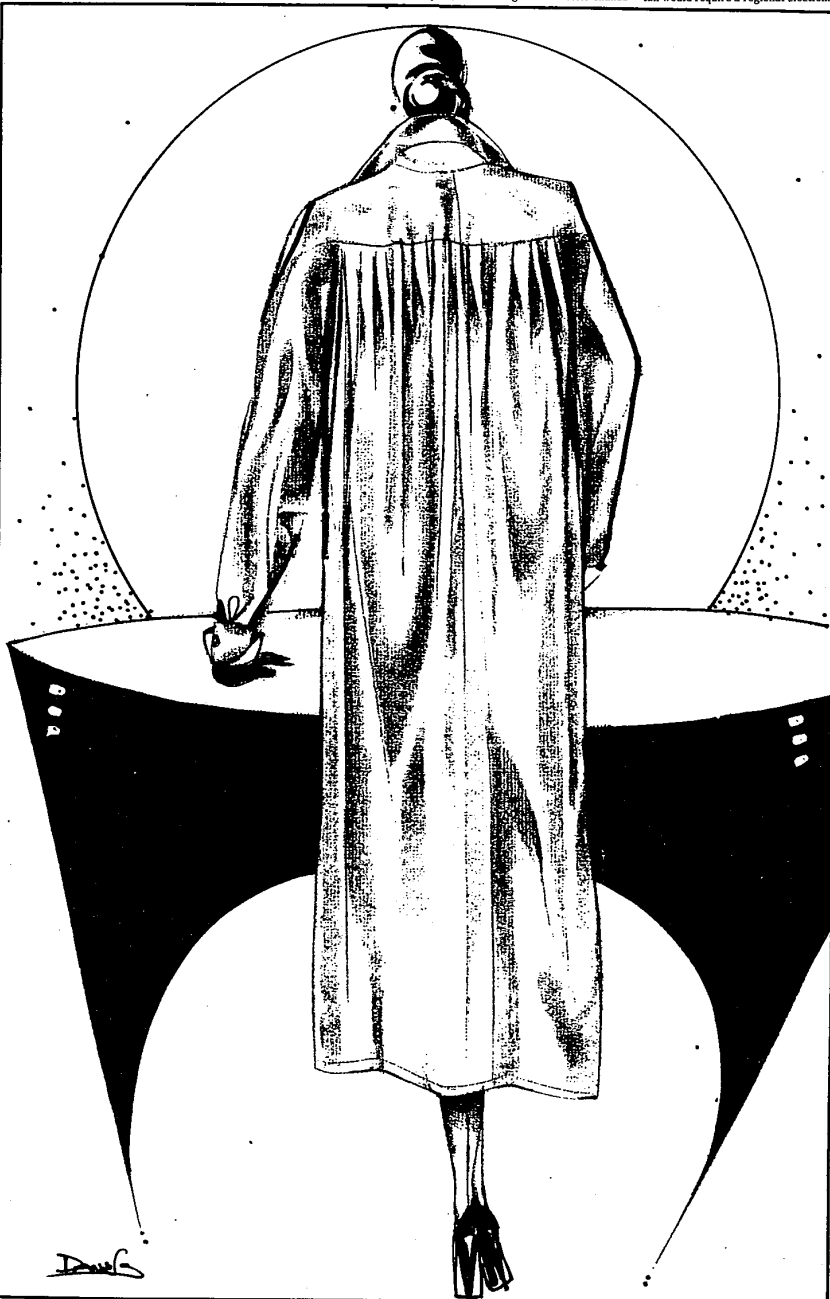
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