

SEMTA pullout?

Funding frazzle snags transport decision

By TOM LONERGAN

If Oakland County withdraws from the Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority (SEMTA), it's not assured of state and federal funds for a county-only transit system.

That's the conclusion of County Executive Daniel Murphy's office, which reported last week that the county can legally withdraw from the seven-county regional transportation authority.

"It's legal for us to (withdraw), but the uncertainties of funding and service have to be addressed," said Deputy County Executive Patrick Nowak.

A FEASIBILITY study of the county's operating its own transit system, released last week to the County Board of Commissioners' planning and building committee, makes no recommendation. The committee received the report with no comment and will discuss it at another meeting at 3 p.m. Thursday.

"We see a number of different approaches," Nowak said, which may be discussed with the committee this week.

Nowak said the county hopes for the continued development of a regional transportation system. "Work, recreation and other needs demand that public transit go beyond our (boundary) lines."

County Executive Murphy voted the county board's decision last year to withdraw from SEMTA. Shortly after SEMTA approved a \$1.4 billion regional transportation plan, which included a \$714 million subway in Detroit, Oakland commissioners requested the intra-county transit feasibility study.

SEMTA's plan calls for a light rail line which would be underground from downtown to Grand Boulevard and elevated from the boulevard to McNichols (Six Mile).

COMMISSIONER JOHN Peterson, R-Rochester, a SEMTA opponent, said last week there is sufficient board support to pull the county out of SEMTA. Such an action requires approval by a two-thirds majority — 18 of the 27 commissioners.

Peterson, who sponsored the feasibility study action, said the report "wasn't exactly what I had hoped for. I do think the county executive's people tried to avoid taking a position one way or the other."

The "underlying factor" in the county's threatened SEMTA withdrawal, said Commissioner Robert McConnell, R-Farmington Hills, is the proposed subway from downtown Detroit to the New Center area.

Board Democrats from the county's southern cities, including Southfield, have opposed withdrawing from SEMTA.

"We've got SEMTA. Why the hell do we want to start something else?" asked Commissioner Alexander Perinoff, D-Southfield. "It doesn't appear that we would get any (state and federal mass transit) grants."

AVAILABILITY of state transportation tax revenues for a county transit system remains in question.

The report adds the county shouldn't presume it can get any of the \$500 million the federal government has committed to SEMTA for the regional transportation system.

Federal funding of a county transit system "is loaded with unresolved questions and uncertainties," SEMTA is the "designated recipient" of federal transit funds for the region, the report says.

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— Commissioner Alexander Perinoff

"OPERATIONALLY," according to the feasibility study, "the impact of (SEMTA) withdrawal would be quick and significant. SEMTA would no longer have the right, nor the responsibility, to operate public transit services in Oakland County."

Withdrawal means the county would lose its representation on the SEMTA Board of Directors. That factor, and uncertainty over whether the county or SEMTA would receive state transportation tax revenues collected in Oakland, make it "highly unlikely that SEMTA would continue to provide any service ... after withdrawal," the report says.

The study notes the time required to start up an Oakland transit system makes purchase of transitional services from SEMTA necessary.

"It would be very difficult for the county system to operate wholly on its own," the report says later, noting that SEMTA, in response to withdrawal, may resist allowing the county to operate commuter service to Detroit and east-west routes to Macomb County.

"Unless the county was content with only intra-county transit services," the report continued, "inter-county services would need to be purchased from SEMTA." Another long-range option, the report says, is purchasing all services from SEMTA.

THE REPORT doesn't spare SEMTA of criticism, however. "The dominance and power that Detroit exhibits (in SEMTA) makes ... equitable services and the fair allocation of funds to Oakland County a virtual impossibility."

"It's a joke the way the (Michigan) legislature has set up SEMTA representation," Nowak said, adding that it discriminates against Oakland County.

Oakland has three representatives on the SEMTA board, one selected by the Board of Commissioners and two appointed by the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG) from persons nominated at a caucus of local governments.

Mayor Coleman Young appoints five Detroit representatives to the 15-member board, suburban Wayne County commissioners appoint three out-county representatives and the Macomb county board appoints two. The four other counties in the SEMTA region share two representatives, one appointed by SEMCOG and one by the governor.

"That's the kind of approach that has incurred anger (towards SEMTA)," Nowak said.

THE REPORT says SEMTA's figures show "a considerable gap exists" between funding and fare revenues the transportation authority receives from having Oakland in the region and what SEMTA spends on services in the county.

SEMTA's Oakland Division reported a 25 percent increase in ridership last month, compared with June 1978. The transit authority began an advanced reservation small bus service in the county the past year. It also operates major line bus routes, park-and-ride bus service, a dial-a-ride program and the commuter rail from Pontiac.

The county is dissatisfied with the level of service SEMTA provides in Oakland and the report says future prospects "do not look very promising."

But just what the county executive recommends remains to be seen.



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Deputy county executive

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Auto experts go to pot (holes)

As sure as crocuses bloom in the spring, so, too, do chuckholes. Both reflect the vagaries of Mother Nature at her best and at her worst. Crocuses, in all their fragile beauty, are a delight to the eye of the beholder. Chuckholes, on the other hand, are the bane of motorists everywhere.

When a vehicle unsuspectingly slams into a pothole, a tire can be blown out, a wheel rim bent, suspension systems

and front end alignment knocked out of kilter. If not ruined, and wheel covers popped off.

Automotive and industry sources estimate that the miniature craters that pockmark highways with the spring thaw are responsible for more than \$200 million in damages to vehicles annually.

In fact, the problem is so serious that engineers at Chrysler Corporation de-

cided years ago they would not wait for the forces of nature. They created their own chuckholes to test vehicle reliability.

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