

Subway fight sparks petition drive, mud-slinging

By TOM LONERGAN

As initial state funding of the Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority (SEMTA) light rail system remains bottled up in Lansing, Oakland County officials this week repeated their opposition to the subway portion of the plan.

At a news conference Monday, County Executive Daniel T. Murphy said the county would launch a petition drive for a ballot referendum on the funding of SEMTA's expected operating deficit should the Michigan Legislature "attempt to circumvent a vote of the people affected on this most important matter."

If need be, Murphy said, a petition campaign would be started this year. SEMTA may put the funding issue before voters in Oakland, Wayne and Macomb counties during or before 1982.

Among plans being considered are funding SEMTA through the personal income tax, a combined sales and use tax, a property transfer tax or an increase in the regional vehicle registration and title transfer tax. The vehicle and title transfer taxes currently provide SEMTA's operating funds. SEMTA plans a poll to be taken of residents in Oakland, Wayne and Macomb counties on the funding issue.

MURPHY, WHO believes county residents will pay to operate the proposed subway-surface light rail system but not use it very often, said some state lawmakers have been proposing the SEMTA operating deficit be funded in a way to avoid a regional vote.

He said State Rep. William Ryan, D-Detroit, "is obviously the leader to avoid it (the deficit funding issue) coming to a vote of the people."

Ryan, chairman of the House Urban Affairs Committee and

long one of the more influential Detroit representatives, called Murphy's statement "malicious."

"He has to be acting in full knowledge that he's lying," Ryan said in a phone interview Tuesday. Ryan said he met last month with Patrick Nowak, a deputy county executive, on the deficit funding issue.

Ryan said his "bottom line" is should an increase in the regional SEMTA tax be proposed, "Headlee (the tax limitation amendment passed in 1978) says there has to be a referendum. I have no problem with that."

Ryan said he prefers that the "nature" of the SEMTA regional tax be switched to a tax "based on income or property." He said there should be "increased state assistance" for SEMTA.

WHILE SEMTA's projected deficit is not the current issue in the legislature, Murphy said it is key because the regional transportation authority won't receive federal funding to construct the subway-surface light rail line along Woodward Avenue until it shows how a projected \$70 million operating deficit in 1990 will be paid.

SEMTA is eyeing a possible \$300 million federal subsidy for the estimated \$1.5 billion regional transportation plan. The federal government is expected to fund 80 percent of the plan's capital cost; the state, 20 percent.

The House is considering initial state funding — in the form of preliminary engineering funds — for the light rail system which is proposed to run underground between downtown Detroit and McNichols (Six Mile) Road, and on surface to Ten Mile Road in Royal Oak.

Most subway opponents see the vote as their last chance to scuttle or reduce the length of the subway.

The light rail system is the main cog of SEMTA's regional

plan which would also increase large and small bus service in western Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties and increase commuter rail service between Pontiac and Detroit.

ALSO AT Monday's press conference were Board of Commissioners Chairman Wallace Gabler, R-Royal Oak, Prosecutor L. Brooks Patterson, Clerk Lynn Allen, Treasurer Hugh Dohany and Drain Commissioner George Kuhn.

The Republican officials, elected countywide, signed a statement urging state representatives from Oakland to oppose the preliminary engineering money for the subway system.

The state has been asked to provide \$4 million for a proposed \$20 million engineering study. Although the remainder would come from the federal government, state approval is required before SEMTA can apply for a \$16 million federal grant.

The proposal now before the house would free some \$2.3 million for the study.

MURPHY REPEATED his opposition to a county withdrawal from SEMTA.

"This is not the right time for Oakland County to withdraw," he said.

Gabler warned that "unless Oakland County is listened to and adjustments made in the state legislature, it would not surprise me to see 18 votes (required of the 27-member board of commissioners) to withdraw from SEMTA."

However, such a vote won't likely face the commissioners at today's board meeting in Pontiac.

A withdrawal proposal by Commissioner Richard Wilcox, R-Ortonville, has been tabled by the county's planning and building committee and will not be reported out to a vote by the county's general government committee.



DANIEL MURPHY
No backing out



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