

County board to study alternative to SEMTA

By Suzie Rollins Singer
staff writer

Should Oakland County get a divorce from SEMTA and operate its own public transportation system?

County Board members from the south end of the county shouted no, "Let's work with SEMTA."

Northern commissioners said SEMTA doesn't serve their constituents, and an exclusive transportation authority is the answer.

AFTER AN hour of debate over future income



Paul Kasper

and high costs, the Oakland Board of Commissioners voted 18-5 to solicit bids from potential consultants to explore the possibility of developing a feasible alternative public transit service to the Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority.

Board members placed a \$10,000 cap on the bids.

Talk of withdrawing from SEMTA has been almost a semiannual event in Oakland County. Commissioners usually do it as a ploy to discourage SEMTA rapid transit plan for the Woodward corridor.

"We're talking about wasting \$10,000 to study something we don't have the money to do. Why are we spending all this money for nothing?" demanded Alexander Perinoff, D-Southfield, who voted against the bid proposal.

REPUBLICAN PAUL Kasper of Bloomfield Hills, who supported it, said, "This proposal would give us an alternative transportation method if SEMTA eliminated its service in Oakland County."

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— Paul Kasper,
Oakland county
commissioner

"All we're trying to do is get information. We're not committing ourselves to anything. We're in a crisis situation. We have people who need public transportation, and if something happens (to the financing), we need a plan. I think \$10,000 is realistic for any consultant to devise alternatives," he added.

Kasper is one of three Oakland County representatives on the SEMTA board.

SEMTA OFFICIALS repeatedly have told taxpayers that the ailing, seven-county authority is suffering from state and federal revenues cuts. Service has been cut 10 percent this year, and future cuts are expected.

They project as much as a two-thirds cut in bus and commuter rail service unless a new source of subsidy is found. A Nov. 3 ballot proposal is probable.

Commissioner Lawrence Perinoff, D-Southfield, joined Perinoff and three others to oppose going out for bids. Both met contended that neither the state, federal government nor Oakland County has enough money to pay for a county transportation system.

"Let's forget about federal funds being available. New Federalism is throwing everything back to the state. We have millions of dollars in plans," Perinoff said.

"The best thing to do is work with SEMTA. To assume this burden ourselves would be impossible," he said.

'Blues' fear drain on reserves

A recommendation denying Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Michigan emergency rate relief dooms BCBSM to a \$100 million underwriting loss this year, said Executive Vice President Richard E. Whitmer.

A Michigan Insurance Bureau hearing officer made that recommendation, and now the next step in the process is up to the insurance commissioner.

"The state regulatory process is floundering. We filed for higher rates last September, more than seven months ago. But according to the hearing officer's order, we won't get a decision until at least next September, and that's optimistic," Whitmer said.

"Yet in seven other eastern and Midwestern states, Blue Cross and Blue Shield plans all received comparable rate increases within three months or less."

"We will immediately file with the insurance commissioner exceptions to the findings of the hearing officer."

"THE COMMISSIONER, according to the hearing officer, does have authority to grant interim rate relief, and we urge her to promptly do so to assure BCBSM's 4.9 million subscribers that the

corporation will remain financially stable," Whitmer said.

Whitmer said the hearing officer's recommendation:

- Ignores near-record losses of \$21.6 million in March, one of the worst monthly losses in BCBSM history.

- Ignores warnings of a respected, independent national consultant that BCBSM will lose \$100 million this year unless the insurance bureau approves immediate adequate rate increases for 450,000 individual/nongroup subscribers.

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