

Giveaway?

People Mover shift spurs hot debate

By Tim Richard and Teri Baines staff writers

To some suburbanites, it's an atrocity: SEMTA is turning over the Downtown People Mover to the city of Detroit — just giving it away.

Other suburban officials are breathing a sigh of relief. The seven-county regional transit authority is unloading the long-delayed project with its embarrassing cost overrun on Detroit Mayor Coleman Young, the man who really wants it.

"We should stop the People Mover," said state Rep. Edna Dunaskis, R-Lake Orion, a north Oakland legislator who would prefer to tear down the 2.9 miles of concrete pillars snaking around downtown Detroit, even though the project is 60 percent complete.

Generally, suburbanites were suspicious of Gov. James J. Blanchard's promise that "not only is there no blank check (for Detroit), there is no check at all." They were almost unanimous in their fear that future cost overruns would be covered by deductions from federal and state aid to SEMTA's suburban bus service.

DUNASKIS AND Rep. Paul Perakis, R-Clinton Township, today were scheduled to go into Oakland Circuit Court to seek an injunction against SEMTA for "turning over 70 percent of SEMTA's capital assets to Detroit."

Attorney Boja Jim Loncarak of Center Line will represent the two lawmakers.

Dunaskis, a third-term lawmaker whose district includes Oakland Township, argues that 1) SEMTA has no power to give away the project, on which more than \$100 million has been spent, and more than 2) Gov. James J. Blanchard has no power to guarantee, even half-heartedly, any People Mover funding without legislative approval.

"They (SEMTA) asked the city if they wanted to receive it, but they didn't ask us," Dunaskis said. He hopes that once he receives the injunction to halt the transfer, the Legislature will cut off funds and "proceed to stop the project."

BUT SEMTA board members, in a 14-0 vote, were emphatic they were doing the right thing.

Susan Helitz, suburban Wayne County SEMTA director, said she favored the agreement because it

will no longer "penalize this area for (the project's) liabilities."

JoAnn Sorocan, Oakland County SEMTA member, noted that SEMTA has had to pump additional money into the People Mover construction — at the expense of bus service funds. Recently, the Farmington Hills councilwoman noted, money planned for computers and terminals was redirected to the People Mover.

"There's still \$6.4 million out of 1986 (budget) we still have to put toward the People Mover," Sorocan said. "Hopefully it won't go beyond that."

FRED TODD, Wayne County SEMTA member, concurred, calling the agreement a "first step" toward assuring the People Mover would no longer jeopardize suburban bus service.

SEMTA is "technically bankrupt" and no longer able to meet cost overruns, said Todd, county budget officer who is acknowledged to be the transit board's sharpest fiscal mind. Furthermore, said Todd, SEMTA has no assured funds to operate the People Mover once it's completed.

A STRANGE disagreement occurred Thursday on the floor of the state Senate.

Sen. Richard Fessler, R-West Bloomfield, a conservative Oakland County lawmaker, defended the People Mover agreement. "It has to be completed. It's impractical to tear it down. It's impractical to let it sit there."

"It's already an economic benefit. Investors are coming in (to downtown)," said Fessler, who was nevertheless unhappy to see Detroit take over the project.

But Sen. Jack Faxon, D-Farmington Hills, a Democrat for 18 of his 20 years in the Legislature, asked, "Realistically, who's going to use it? I have continually lamented the demise of downtown Detroit for what people call 'progress,'" Faxon, pointing to the tearing down of the old City Hall, Kern and Crowley Milner stores and the partial malling of Woodward Avenue.

BLANCHARD'S statement that "overruns be-

yond the city's ability to pay will come from SEMTA's budget" drew sharp rebuttal from legislators.

"He has to get legislative approval," replied Sen. Rudy Nichols, R-Waterford, whose district includes the Rochester area.

"We're providing the SEMTA money," said Faxon. "I question how the money is to be siphoned off."

"He (the governor) has no authority to appropriate, we do," said Fessler. He said the situation underscored the need for his bill to reorganize SEMTA as a three-county authority.

"The governor unilaterally amended the contract after the fact," said Patricia Nowak, deputy Oakland County executive. "That's double dealing. We're upset about it. Everybody's afraid."

As chairman of the Senate Transportation Committee, Fessler won passage of his bill to shift control of a new transit authority to the "Big Four" — Detroit's mayor, the Wayne County executive, the Oakland County executive and the Macomb County board chairman. But Fessler's bill is stalled in a House committee, where the Big Four have been paying little attention to it.

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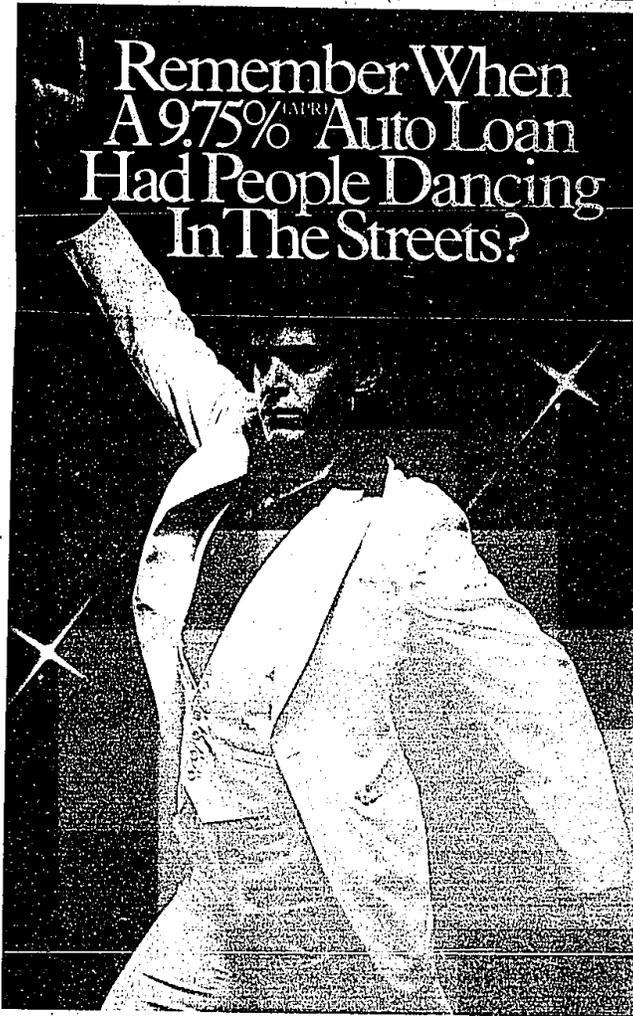
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