

Transit authority seeks more suburban cas

By Wayne Peal
staff writer

If suburbanites want mass transit, they're going to have to ante up. That's the message from the Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation, operator of bus routes in Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties.

SMART could cease operations as soon as April due to a projected \$7.7 million deficit, officials said.

While SMART seeks a merger with the profitable Detroit Department of Transportation bus system, it also seeks "dedicated revenue" from tri-county suburbs.

Options include a county transportation tax, city and township taxes, or direct contributions from local operating budgets.

"WE CAN'T say what form it would take," SMART vice chairman Matt Wirgus said. "We can't raise taxes ourselves; we don't have that power."

While supportive, Wayne County Executive Edward McNamara has said he wouldn't support any tax increase unless SMART reorganizes.

"There is no way in the world Wayne County is going to support taxes unless we're convinced the sys-

tem is efficient," said deputy county executive Michael Duggan, also a SMART vice chairman.

Merging with Detroit is critical to making the suburban system efficient, SMART board members agreed.

BOARD MEMBERS supported seeking the merger Tuesday in an unanimous vote.

Both systems will spend a combined \$185 million this year, SMART officials said. That figure could be trimmed by as much as \$37 million by merging, they said. The merger could eliminate duplicate bus routes and trim office staff.

It could also eliminate non-revenue producing miles for SMART buses. Now, SMART can take customers late Detroit but can't bring them out.

"There's absolutely no reason there shouldn't be one system," Wirgus said.

SMART is also considering overhauling its dial-a-ride service and seeking money from merchants and business organizations to pay for other specialized routes.

SMART also wants to consolidate 300 smaller local bus programs into the new city-and-suburban transportation authority.

BETWEEN D-DOT and SMART, it is clear SMART could use the savings the most.

In addition to carrying a \$3 million debt from its previous budget, SMART is expected to run more than \$4 million in debt for 1991-92.

SMART is \$1.8 million over budget in labor settlements, insurance payments and worker compensation costs, officials said.

In addition, SMART now expects \$1.3 million less than originally projected in state gas and weight tax money, \$300,000 less from other sources and \$700,000 less in fares. Ridership is down 6 percent, Wirgus said.

SMART must also maintain its \$1 million reserve as insurance. Despite the reduced gas and weight tax grant, SMART apparently is having little problem with Gov. John Engler's staff.

The governor is expected to approve an advance grant to keep SMART rolling, Wirgus said.

Getting Detroit and the suburbs to sign on, however, could prove more difficult.

Detroit already spends \$50 million out of the city operating budget to support its bus system, Wirgus said. Detroit is unlikely to agree to merge unless the suburbs contributed more. (For suburban reaction, see related story.)

Suburbs say they need convincing

By Wayne Peal
staff writer

SMART issued the call, but local communities aren't rushing to answer.

The regional transportation authority seeks more money from local communities to keep its buses rolling.

Plagued by an estimated \$7.7 million debt this year — and with projections showing a combined \$19.3 million debt over the next three years — SMART seeks to merge with the Detroit Department of Transportation.

Without the merger, SMART could close as soon as this spring.

But the merger could depend on whether local communities will pay more for mass transit.

"Suburban communities have had a free ride — at least in terms of supporting transportation from their local budgets," SMART vice chairman Matt Wirgus said.

THOSE DAYS are apparently over.

To date, SMART receives 62 percent of its funding from the state, another 16 percent from the federal government but state and local

grants are shrinking.

Whether local communities will agree to new taxes or general fund contributions is far from certain.

Oakland County bus riders are few.

Less than 1 percent of all working county residents take the bus to work, according to Troy resident Wirgus.

"We're a community where people like to drive their own cars," Rochester Hills Mayor Billie Ireland said. "We've never had much mass transit to speak of."

While the demand for mass transit might grow as area traffic worsens, Ireland said money could be difficult to find.

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