

SMART's future rests on suburbs

By Wayne Peal
staff writer

SMART buses will keep running through next June, but the transit service's long term future rests with suburban taxpayers.

A short term operating plan announced last week is expected to help overcome \$7.7 million in current debt and keep the Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation from adding new debt next year.

Major SMART bus routes were to have shut down March 27.

SMART's plan includes a new \$124,000 bill to Birmingham for dial-a-ride services. The city has paid \$16,000-a-year for the service under a 1970s agreement, but the fee is being raised.

"IT GIVES Birmingham an option, how much service do they want and how much are they willing to pay for it," said Bryan Amann, the Wayne County delegate to the SMART board.

Southfield's shuttle service rate will also be increased. SMART will also sell property it owns in Birmingham, Bloomfield Hills and Detroit — most of its parking lots or open space.

The plan also includes:
• Budget cuts of \$4.3 million for 1992-93, including a wage freeze for SMART union personnel. Next year's SMART operating budget will be cut 10 percent across-the-board.
• Additional cuts of \$1.7 million, to be determined in 90 days from items ranging from health care to a

first-ever early retirement plan.

Budget cuts range from large scale — \$32,524 from leaving currently vacant position unfilled — to small scale — \$6,000 in eliminating seminar travel and fees.

EVERY MORE FAT will eventually be trimmed, said SMART operations director Paul Majka. "Everything we've presented is a safe estimate," Majka said. "I'm confident there's even more that can be saved."

Despite that, SMART officials say experts to begin campaigning for a transit tax.

"This only keeps us going to June 1993, after that we need a source of dedicated revenue," said SMART board president Matt Wrigou, a Troy resident. "It could be a sales tax, it could be a property tax, but we need something."

Other moves, already approved by SMART officials, include saving \$800,000 by delaying the purchase of

new buses.

Both moves are expected to bring a combined \$1.45 million in savings and new revenue.

In addition, SMART will eliminate nearly \$4.5 million in what Duggan called "unnecessary reserves."

The move frees \$1 million held for self-insurance, as well as a \$3.45 million workers compensation reserve.

THE \$1 MILLION RESERVE fund isn't needed because of other assets already held by SMART. Duggan said. The \$3.45 million compensation fund isn't needed, he added, because the state will already cover worker claims should SMART cease operating.

At \$47.8 million, SMART's projected 1992-93 budget is \$5.3 million less than this year's.

SMART officials still hope to merge with the Detroit Department of Transportation, though there have been no recent talks.

Area church takes on transit

By Wayne Peal
staff writer

Mass transit is more than just a dollars-and-cents issue for some area residents. For them, it's a moral issue, too.

"I remember being in Detroit recently and seeing about eight men with Will Work for Food signs" recalled Ann Therese O'Sullivan of Farmington Hills. "I thought that even if I could give those men a job cleaning windows or painting my house, they probably couldn't even get there."

That kind of thinking spurred O'Sullivan and other Birmingham Unitarian Church members into action.

As soon as SMART's proposed shutdown of major bus routes was announced, members of the church's social justice committee gathered roughly 50 signatures on petitions calling for services to be continued.

Now that the shutdown is on hold, members are preparing for another campaign — this time assuring the future of regional mass transit.

"WE'RE LOOKING AT things very carefully," Birmingham resident Annis Pratt said. "We want to get as much information as we can."

Last week's announcement that bus service would continue at least through mid-1993 is seen as evidence the petitions had some ef-

fect.

"We see mass transit as a major social issue," said Pratt, an occasional SMART rider. "For a metropolitan area, lacking adequate mass transit is a major, major issue."

While SMART and community officials are debating the merits of a property tax or sales tax, group members are re-examining the issue on their own.

"WE'D LIKE to think we, in some way, made a difference," said O'Sullivan who rarely rides SMART buses herself.

Though SMART hasn't yet proposed a transit tax, group members already back the concept.

"We'll help organize people when there's a proposal to be voted upon," O'Sullivan said. "But we might not be active again for awhile."

While others may point to SMART's relatively low daily ridership — roughly 35,000 in a three-county area of more than 3.8 million people — group members point to its vital necessity for those who use it.

"There are many, many people who wouldn't be able to get to work or to school without the buses," O'Sullivan said. "We'd like to speak for them."

Anyone interested in learning more about the group can call Birmingham Unitarian Church, 647-2380, and leave a message for either Pratt or O'Sullivan.

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