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Businessmen: SMART cuts to hurt

By PAT MURPHY
Staff Writer

The following scene may be repeated in some form with increasing frequency if — as Oakland County commissioners believed last week — drastic cuts are implemented early next month in the area transit system, SMART (Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation).

Every work day about 7:30 a.m., a van leaves Jay Kay Wash in Rochester Hills. It makes a 45-minute trip to the White Castle at Eight Mile and Woodward where it picks up as many as 20 people, mostly men, and brings them back to the car wash.

The ritual is repeated around 5 p.m., this time taking workers from Rochester Hills back to the White Castle.

His company provides its own shuttle service even with SMART operating at current levels, said car wash manager Frank Sever. "Without it, our workers wouldn't have any way of getting here."

If SMART cuts back — or ceases operations entirely — his company is faced with expanding its shuttle service or going out of business, Sever said.

Sever is one of numerous businessmen taking a dim view of the decision by Oakland commissioners last week against authorizing a vote on a millage proposal on the May 23 ballot.

Businessman Elie Sever and

TRANSPORTATION

Clarence Tolbert, manager of Benington Restaurant in Bloomfield Hills, insist SMART is essential to their continued operations. Without SMART they may be forced to provide alternative transportation — such as the shuttle service from Jay to the White Castle.

"SMART is vital to our business," said Tolbert, who insisted SMART should be looking for ways to upgrade service, and commissioners should be willing to help — or at least put the issue on the ballot so voters can decide.

Among those who agree is Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson. "I am both disappointed and embarrassed by the board of commissioners' failure to . . . place the transportation millage question on the May 23 county-wide ballot," Patterson said at Thursday's meeting.

"Frankly, Oakland County denied its responsibility," chided the executive. Wayne and Macomb counties had lived up to their responsibilities by putting the same millage proposal on their respective May 23 ballots, Patterson said.

What commissioners, mostly Republicans, failed to do Thursday was approve a proposal from Democrats asking the board to

suspend rules — and bypass committee hearings — so the board could vote on putting a .3 mill property tax hike on the May 23 ballot.

Republican objections generally fell into two categories.

"We believe raising property taxes to help SMART is sending good money after bad," said board chair Larry P. Crake, R-Waterford. "If we (Oakland taxpayers) give them money, SMART will be back looking for more in a very short while because they can't live within a budget."

Commissioner David L. Moffin voiced his objections like this: "Why do all the proposed solutions to this sudden so-called transit crisis involve government rushing to the rescue?"

Commissioner Donald W. Jensen, R-Birmingham, said his phone has been ringing "off the hook" because of people want SMART to get enough help to continue running. "A lot of people, especially along the Woodward corridor — rely on SMART," he said.

Other commissioners, Jensen said, have also been deluged with calls . . . from people expressing another view. "Some commissioners have had a flood of calls from people who don't want SMART to

get any more tax money. "I guess it depends on where you live," said Jensen.

Crake, among others, believes Oakland may yet decide to put the issue of a property tax hike for SMART on the ballot, in November if not before. "I don't know what difference it will make, however," he said. "I believe it would be decided."

The proposal Patterson and others want to put before voters would call for a .3 mill hike. Voters could indeed reject the increase, they say. But they want voters to make the decision.

SMART, in the meantime, will eliminate line-haul service early next month, marketing director June A. West said Friday. Line-haul buses are generally large buses running on fixed routes, she said.

Service for the handicapped and the elderly will continue for an undetermined period, she said. "But line-haul service will cease."

What happens after that, West said, will be determined May 23 by voters in Macomb and Wayne counties.

Oakland residents would be part of that decision making process if something happens and commissioners do indeed move to put the proposal on the May 23 ballot in Oakland.

Crake and other commissioners, however, say that's unlikely.

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