

SMART changes bus routes, schedules public hearings

By PAT MURPHY
STAFF WRITER

For Jeff Kline, the proposed changes in the SMART bus routes are almost God-sent.

"My workers won't have to walk so far," said Kline, general manager of Ticketmaster in Bingham Farms.

Kline estimates that 10 percent of his 500 workers rely on SMART (Suburban Mobility Authority) to get to their jobs. Since 1989, however, most have taken a SMART bus to the intersection of Twelve Mile Road and Telegraph, and then walked last half a mile to the master office at 30150 Telegraph.

"It's OK in good weather," he said. "But in the winter, it's tough."

That is scheduled to change, however, once the new SMART routes are in place, probably in January. One of the new routes calls for SMART buses to travel Telegraph Road from the downtown community of Taylor to 14 Mile Road in Bingham Farms and Franklin.

Previously, there was no SMART service along Telegraph. SMART buses might intersect with Telegraph. But there was no direct service along the major thoroughfare.

The new route along Telegraph is one of the changes SMART will begin outlining next week, as transit system officials begin a series of meetings designed to tell voters what they will get for the tax hike they approved last June 6.

"This is cutting-edge stuff," said Bloomfield Hills resident Matthew M. Wirgau, who is chairman of the SMART board. "And it's just the beginning."

To hear Wirgau and other SMART officials tell it, the changes will indeed make SMART a first-class transit system. They claim to have incorporated features from other systems and tailored them to Oakland County needs.

Critics have long accused SMART of being an expensive, inefficient bureaucracy, saddled with indifferent workers protected by bountiful union contracts.

Often cited as the symbol of that inefficiency were the 40-foot line haul buses — largest in the

SMART fleet — that traveled main arteries like Woodward and parts of Rochester Road. While the line-haul buses were filled to near capacity at peak periods, they sometimes ran nearly empty ... often prompting derisive comments.

"They're like dinosaurs," said Oakland County Commissioner Shelley G. Taub, R-Bloomfield Hills, calling them holdovers from a bygone age.

Supporters — including Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson — acknowledged SMART was inefficient. But he urged voters to approve higher taxes with the understanding drastic changes were forthcoming. Rebuilding SMART might be difficult, Patterson acknowledged. But scrapping the transit system and starting over — as some critics wanted to do — would be impractical, if not impossible.

Approve the June 6 millage, Patterson promised, "and we'll convert SMART into a world class transit system that people will want to join."

The "want to join" comment was a reference to influential communities like Bloomfield Hills, Rochester Hills and West Bloomfield that decided against taking part in the June 6 SMART millage election.

When those communities "opted out" of the election, their main links with SMART were severed. SMART buses — the 40-footers as well as small shuttles that in some communities provided rides to the handicapped and the elderly — no longer operated in those communities.

Patterson, Wirgau and others hope that changes in the routes and service will prompt some of those communities to "opt back in," that is, rejoin SMART. John L. Grubbs, deputy county executive, said some communities have approached him about rejoining SMART. But they're doing so quietly, and none of those communities are ready to publicly commit.

Officials hope the changes — with new routes and innovative service — will help change all that.

To begin with, there will be fewer 40-foot buses. Some will be sold off and replaced with zipper 29-footers. The giant will still ser-

vice main corridors linking the suburbs to downtown Detroit.

But small buses and vans will be the workhorses, according to SMART plans, and flexibility will be the byword. Riders will, for example, be able to:

■ Take a SMART shuttle from McCann Erickson in Troy to Norm's North Eaton Street Station in Birmingham for lunch.

■ Call a taxi — at SMART expense — if they ride the transit system into a designated "Job Zone" and have to leave early because of an emergency, such as having to pick up a sick child at school.

■ Ride a SMART bus to one of two "Job Zones" — one in Auburn Hills and the other in Troy-Birmingham — then catch a shuttle to the job location. Another shuttle will pick the worker up at an appointed time for the return trip.

■ Ride SMART from Livonia to the Farmington Hills campus of OCC, and then a shuttle to a job site along Northwestern Highway.

"We had to make changes," said Dirks. "But we have to initiate those changes from the community up. We can't design the system. Input from the community will shape our routes and our service."

Some proposed changes are routine, even fundamental. When the changes are approved and implemented — probably in December or January — SMART riders will be able to:

■ Get from Southfield to Royal Oak — along 10 Mile or 12 Mile roads — without transferring.

■ Go from the Eastland Mall to Telegraph Road without transferring.

SMART has scheduled a series of six meetings, two each in Macomb, Oakland and Wayne counties. The Oakland meetings will be at 1:30 p.m., Thursday, July 27, in the Senior Center Community Room of McDonnell Towers, 24400 Civic Center in Southfield, and 7 p.m. on the same day in the Pontiac Public Library at Pike and Wide Track.

A public hearing on the SMART changes is scheduled for noon on Aug. 17 at SMART headquarters on the 9th floor of the First National Building, 660 Woodward, in downtown Detroit.

Let 'em eat pie!



Any way you slice it: One of the best places to be on Thursday, July 13, during the recent Farmington Founders Festival was the basement of the First United Methodist Church, site of the judging of the Festival Pie Baking Contest. In the above photo, judges Karen Lakatos of Merle Norman Cosmetics and Mark Ziegler of Heeney-Sundquist Funeral Home sample Junior Division entries. At right, Raun Young helps a contestant by taking her name tag off the pie plate. The 12-year-old said he only has baked cookies. He couldn't enter the contest anyway, he said, because his mom, Sherry, helped run the contest. Only two pies were entered in the Junior Division (18 and under). Jolie Swiercz won with an apple pie, and Ellie Harding was



second with a blueberry. In the Senior Division (19 and over), Janey Teevin won with a lemon, Grace Tocco was second with a cherry, Julie Skwiercz took third with a blueberry, and Sherry Carnell was fourth with a strawberry. Farmington

Observer Editor Tom Baer joined Lakatos and Ziegler as a Junior Division judge. Senior Division judges were Carol Dave of Omega Travel, Marion Tobkin of Three Oaks Furniture and Glenn Schafer of Thayer-Rock Funeral Home.

Oakland County meetings listed

Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation will begin series of six meetings in Macomb, Oakland and Wayne counties next week to outline proposed changes in transit service.

The new SMART service is still open for suggestion, according to officials like Matthew M. Wirgau, chairman of the SMART board of directors, who said new

routes are designed "from the community up."

There will be two public meetings in each of the three counties, followed by a public hearing at the SMART headquarters in downtown Detroit.

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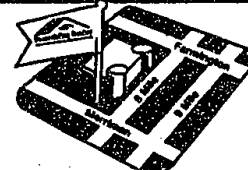
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