

Millage fuels SMART service in Oakland County

BY SALLY TATO
STAFF WRITER

Rick Kaufman has no qualms about catching the bus to work. In fact, if his daily agenda didn't call for so many meetings outside of his Detroit office, then it would be routine for the Plymouth resident to drive out to Ladbroke DRC in Livonia, park his car and catch an early bus to the office.

The high-profile businessman and small-time commercial actor sees the importance of a good public transportation system in the tri-county area, but doesn't think others do. He could point to a handful of communities in Oakland and Wayne counties, including his own, that decided to opt out of a millage vote last year that would've continued SMART bus service on their system in 1995.

Kaufman isn't a public transportation expert and doesn't want to neutralize the meaning



STAFF PHOTO BY TOM HORNEMAN

SMART leader: Rick Kaufman, SMART's general manager, is proud of the improvements the public transportation service has made in the tri-county area.

behind the Motor City motto. But he does have a job to do.

Kaufman is SMART's latest general manager. His name might sound familiar since the company recently began a radio and television marketing campaign that features Kaufman in

quickly SMART commercials. In the ads, Kaufman sits behind the wheel of a bus inviting listeners to try SMART as a viable alternative to driving.

But an actual bus ride does more for Kaufman than get him where he needs to go. It gives

him direction in what he needs to do.

As soon as the bus doors open, Kaufman looks for a friendly, courteous driver; a clean bus; and a smooth ride, without jerky starts and stops. After a few moments of conversation with fellow riders and the driver, Kaufman introduces himself and gauges reactions to the ride.

SMART talk

He says people tell him they're pleased with SMART's service, especially since changes were made to the system following a .33 millage tax increase that adds \$18 million annually to the \$60 million operating budget. Other funds come from state and federal grants, fare box revenue and advertising proceeds. Millage monies come from participating communities in Wayne, Macomb and Oakland counties, where combined weekly ridership is about 182,000.

Further assurance comes from communities that returned to SMART this year — such as West Bloomfield and Bloomfield Hills — after declining to partici-

pate in last year's millage vote.

"It tells me SMART is doing a good job and the communities are realizing the importance of public transportation," said Kaufman, a former Wayne County Circuit Court judge who took the SMART reins in January. "Those communities who decided not to participate and who have changed their minds would not have done that if they had heard negative things about SMART from those communities who stayed in."

Since voters in 20 Oakland County communities approved the 3-year millage in June 1995, SMART, the Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation, has purchased 136 new buses, revamped fixed routes between counties, worked with communities to determine their inner-city needs and added new routes, including one that stretches along Telegraph Road for the first time since SMART was established in the 1970s.

Nancy, a Detroit resident who did not want her last name used, is very pleased with the latter.

'I hope to see the deficit completely eliminated and I hope to see SMART continue to do the fundamentals. I hope to see SMART serving more people than it has ever served before.'

Rick Kaufman
SMART's General Manager

Nancy used to have to turn to family or friends for a ride to the Oakland County court complex on Telegraph Road in Pontiac. She travels there frequently to handle legal matters related to gaining custody of her daughter.

"I like the bus because it helps me and my daughter get around," said Nancy while she waited at a bus stop shelter on Woodward in Royal Oak last week to catch a ride home. "It helps me to be independent and I think it has improved because I am able to get to the courthouse because of SMART. There was a time I couldn't get to the Oakland County Courthouse."

It's that kind of service that

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