



The Big Story

On May 7, 2003, Rita Cosby, host of FOX News Channel's (FNC) weekend program *The Big Story* Weekend Edition with Rita Cosby and a senior correspondent for the network, visited Steppingsstone School, Farmington Hills, to discuss broadcast journalism with students. Pictured, Cosby answered questions as students Susan Okla (left), Chrissy Hart (back left) and Allie Alsals (partially hidden on left) looked on.

BY HUGH GALLAGHER
STAFF WRITER

An agreement was reached Thursday to form a Detroit Area Regional Transportation Authority.

The leaders of Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties and the city of Detroit agreed to begin steps to create the new mass transit authority without waiting for approval from the state legislature.

Wayne County Executive Robert Ficano said that discussions have been going on with Gov. Jennifer Granholm's office for several weeks, with Alan Helmkamp representing Wayne County.

"We worked through the possibilities in informal discussions," Ficano said. "A first-class urban area has to have a transportation system we're serious about. It's a quality of life issue."

Ficano said developing a regional transit system was crucial for creating jobs for the area.

The agreement, officially between Regional Transportation Coordinating Council, which coordinates city and suburban transportation; the Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation, the suburban transit system; and the City of Detroit, was made under the Urban Cooperation Act of 1967, which allows local governments to come together to form regional authorities.

'This was on Engler's desk, and he vetoed it on the last day he was in office.'

L. Brooks Patterson
Oakland County executive

A bill authorizing formation of DARTA was approved by the state legislature last year but vetoed by former Gov. John Engler just before he left office. The bill was reintroduced this year but hasn't made any progress through the legislature.

"This was on Engler's desk, and he vetoed it on the last day he was in office," said L. Brooks Patterson, Oakland County executive. "In the last couple months, it has been getting chewed up in the legislature, and lost a lot of the provisions in the original bill."

"In desperation, we took the bill by the horns and did an end around by using the Urban Cooperation Act."

Patterson hasn't heard much criticism from Lansing about the move, and doesn't believe he will.

"What's so wrong with having a transit system that helps the handicapped, the elderly and the working poor? That is a basic necessity in a society like ours," he said.

Matt Wirgau, chairman of the board of SMART, said there are differences in the original legislation and the

agreement reached Thursday. Under the legislation, DARTA would have been a taxing authority and local communities would have been able to opt out of participation.

DARTA will have no taxing authority under the current plan; all communities are in but funding will be determined at a later date.

The agreement is important for receiving federal funding. U.S. Rep. Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick, D-Detroit, has worked to earmark \$850,000 for planning and staff for DARTA. The formation of a unified authority will make it easier to obtain operational funding from the federal government.

"Given the veto in the last session, Brooks, the governor and (Detroit Mayor) Kwame Kilpatrick have stepped up to do what's best for the region," said U.S. Rep. Thaddeus McCotter, R-Livonia, who as a state senator last year was active in steering the DARTA legislation through the state senate.

"It shows that our region is serious about developing a transportation system for the region, which is important when we go seeking funding," he said.

Under the agreement, DARTA would be governed by an 11-member board including two members appointed by the chairperson of the Macomb County Board; two appointed by the Oakland County execu-

tive; two non-Detroit residents appointed by Wayne County executive; two Detroit residents, one appointed by the mayor of Detroit and one by the Detroit City Council; one Monroe County representative; one member appointed by the RTCC; and one member appointed by SMART.

Fasterson said board appointments should be made within the next two months.

DARTA will assume all the functions of RTCC to coordinate the operations of SMART and D-DOT, the Detroit transit system. By March 2004, DARTA is required to hire a chief executive officer and by March 2005, DARTA is required to adopt a comprehensive regional public transportation service plan for Southeast Michigan.

A final decision on the authority will be made by voters, according to Patterson.

"Realistically, it will take a couple of years before our residents will get a chance to vote on it. This effort has been in the works for 37 years, so it's not going to happen overnight," Patterson said.

Wirgau said the agreement doesn't address the many disagreements over rapid transit, such as differences over development of a light rail system. But he said it's a move toward better discussion.

"It gets us to the point where we're coming together about planning a system in a cooperative venue," said Wirgau.

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