

Ask bus merger

Transit bill draws new SEMTA ire

By TIM RICHARD

Leaders of the Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority (SEMTA) are opposing the rapid transit reorganization and funding bill heading to the Michigan Senate floor unless the bill requires merger of Detroit's bus system into the SEMTA regional system.

In a major blow against a bill that has only lukewarm senate support, the SEMTA board voted 5-2 Tuesday to insist that any reorganization which would allow Detroit Mayor Coleman Young to appoint five SEMTA board members not take place "unless and until that legislation requires the merger of the Detroit transportation system with SEMTA at the same time."

Supporting the resolution were board Chairman Joseph P. Bianco Jr. of Bloomfield Hills, Vice-Chairman Marilyn Thayer of Ann Arbor, James Gorman of Fraser, J.A. (Art) T. Mullen of Grosse Pointe and Julie Evans of Birmingham.

Opposed were two Detroiters—Walter Douglas and Tom Turner. Another Detroit-er, Rudy McCulloch, was absent. One seat is vacant.

Don't rock the boat. We don't want to deal with it."

Detroiters Thayer and Douglas argued it would be better to "rely" on legislators than to pass a resolution of opposition. They said top priority was to get regional funding of rapid transit construction.

Answered Mrs. Evans, newest member of the SEMTA board. "Every board meeting I've been at, this question comes up about a coordinated system. We do not have a regional system. Ask the guy on Woodward Avenue who sees a SEMTA bus go by and can't take it."

"We can't operate a two-boarded monster," she said, referring to the dual bus system.

MULLEN SAYS discussions about merging Detroit's system with SEMTA have been going on for three years. He said it would give Detroit no incentive to merge if board restructuring took place first.

The resolution said in part:

"Whereas the federal government, through the Urban Mass Transit Administration, has clearly stated that it is desirable to create a single unified transportation system before providing money for a rapid transit system; and

"Whereas SEMTA has not been completely successful in its negotiations with the City of Detroit to bring about a single unified transportation system; and

"Whereas SEMTA feels that its board should not be restructured unless and until there is a firm commitment on the part of all parties that the Detroit Department of Transportation will be merged into the Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority; and

"Whereas a memorandum of understanding (the tripartite agreement) was signed by the governor, state highway commissioner, City of Detroit and SEMTA in which all parties agreed to have the Detroit system become a part of the SEMTA system at the same time that the SEMTA board was being restructured;

"Now therefore be it resolved that the board of directors of SEMTA express its regret that the restructuring occur simultaneously with said and that the SEMTA board therefore expresses its opposition to Senate Bill 1275 and any other legislation dealing with this issue unless and until that legislation requires the merger of the Detroit transportation system with SEMTA at the same time that the SEMTA board is restructured."

SEMTA's position, Bianco said, was that the federal government would be reluctant to fund its 80 per cent share of a rapid transit system unless southeast Michigan could show it was able to merge and operate its bus systems. SEMTA has been able to purchase all bus systems in the seven-county region except Detroit's.

Young's position, SEMTA leaders recalled, was that Detroit wanted to protect its investment in its buses by having a direct voice in picking its share of SEMTA board members.

Mrs. Thayer said the tripartite agreement required the merger of the Detroit system into SEMTA before the restructuring could take place. Otherwise, she said, Detroiters would be "on both sides of the bargaining table" selling their bus system and buying it on the SEMTA board.

"THE GOVERNOR'S office was not responsive" to the lack of any language in the bill requiring merger, she said.

"Plawewski and (State Rep. William) Ryan said if we could provide language in the proper legal form, they would consider it. The language was drafted by our in-house counsel," Mrs. Thayer said.

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