

How A Private Bus Operator Sees Public Transit

By TIM RICHARD

Take the passenger service, at a fair price, and leave the charter service. That sums up the attitude of one local operator of a private bus line to a proposal that eight bus systems in southeastern Michigan be consolidated into a single system.

The speaker was Adolph Schiller, general manager of Northville Coach Line, Inc., one of the eight proposed for the unification. The other seven are Detroit's city-owned DSR system and six private firms—Great Lakes Transit, Metropolitan Transit, Lake Shore Coach Lines, Macomb Lines, Pontiac Transit and Bee Line.

The proposal is made by a consulting firm, Coverdale & Colpitts, working for the Southeastern Michigan Transit Authority. SEMTA, as it's commonly called, is a six-county special authority created in 1967 by the Michigan Legislature to get into the transit business, starting with buses and then moving into rail and/or rapid transit.

But while private operator Schiller is willing to see SEMTA get into the passenger business, he reflects some of the hurt feelings that private operators have about the public agency, and has some words of experienced advice about how SEMTA ought to operate.

"THE IDEA OF CONSOLIDATION is good—if they go about it the right way. Not like DSR," Schiller said in his upstairs office in a former Sunoco station on Seven Mile Road in Northville Township.

DSR, which for decades has been exempt from the jurisdiction of the state Public Service Commission, decided to extend its service from the Detroit city limits at Seven Mile and Grand River westward to the Livonia Mall at Middle Belt. Northville Coach objected, and with reason: Its run extends from the City of Northville to the Detroit limits, and DSR was duplicating its service for three of the best miles.

Schiller's company filed suit in court in 1964 to halt the DSR action and won a favorable decision from the State Supreme Court 3½ years later. DSR is now out of that section of Seven Mile.

"I hope SEMTA doesn't work on the same basis, trying to push us out," he said.

Another thing that irks Schiller is that SEMTA's consultants didn't discuss their proposals with the private owners before issuing the report. "When they started the study two years ago, we (all the operators) had one meeting with them in which they asked us for a letter of authorization" to inspect and inventory their properties. "I think everybody agreed to this."

The consultants visited his headquarters about six months ago for the inventory. That was the last he knew of their work until he saw a story about the report in the Observer Newspapers. SEMTA didn't even send him a copy of the report.

SCHILLER ALSO THINKS SEMTA might be better off if there were some "bus people" on the board: "Who knows about running a busline unless he's run one?"

Yet he agrees with the consultants' conclusion: That eight passenger bus systems should be consolidated into one.

"There's no question that a consolidated system could give better service. Equipment would cost less. There wouldn't be duplications in some places," Schiller said.

It's clear from the consultants' report that SEMTA would buy out, rather than force out, the existing bus systems. Schiller also is concerned that some of the present employees be absorbed into the consolidated system. "We have one employee who's been driving for us since he got out of World War II," he said.

As for himself, Schiller and his wife Vikki, who handles the firm's charter bus work, Schiller says, "I may stay with the consolidated company, maybe in a different capacity. We're hoping this will happen. It would be hard for us to go into another field of work. And SEMTA's going to need experienced people."

PASSENGER-BUS SERVICE is a losing proposition for most of the lines proposed for the consolidation.

Detroit's DSR has made enough eight of the last 10 years to cover operating expenses. But when such non-cash costs as depreciation of the equipment and buildings are figured in, it's barely a break-even activity, and three of the last five years show a bookkeeping deficit.

Northville's financial results are even worse. Over the last five years, it has averaged \$128,000 in operating revenue and \$141,000 in operating costs for an average annual operating deficit of \$13,000. When all costs are figured in, the deficit rises to \$19,000 a year.

Most serious thinkers on the subject of public transportation assume that any consolidated system will need a transfusion of government aid to keep going, although hopefully the system may break even on out-of-pocket costs. A system owned by SEMTA, a governmental agency, would be exempt from taxes, and that would help, too.

At present, Northville Coach operates over only one passenger route—Seven Mile from Northville to Detroit. Northville State Hospital employees could make good use of the service, but few do, Schiller says, and the run carries mainly visitors to the hospital. Even Schoolcraft College students don't ride the bus.

Ford Motor Co. asked the bus company to run a line from Detroit to its Wixom plant,

but that didn't pay off, and Ford has turned to other methods.

NORTHVILLE COACH in the past has run buses from Plymouth to downtown Detroit, from Plymouth through the middle of Livonia to the Livonia Mall, and to Metropolitan Airport. Those, too, were failures.

Schiller recalled: "We put ads with coupons in the Observer, and hundreds of people filled them out saying they would ride it. We operated that for a year—from Feb. 28, 1963 until 1964—and never carried more than six or seven people."

The moral is that people will say "yes" to a survey about buses, but when the time comes to use the bus, they'll stick to the car.

During horse racing season, usually two of the region's three tracks are open at a time—one in the afternoon for the thoroughbred runners, and another in the evening for harness races. At those times, Northville Coach carries passengers from one track to the other.

Schiller's advice is that SEMTA should get its feet wet quickly on how a passenger bus system actually operates, and so it is a step at a time. Rather than consolidating all eight systems simultaneously, it should begin by picking up one, merging a couple more, and then taking over the entire thing.

He points out that Ann Arbor's private bus company stepped out some months ago, and the City of Ann Arbor has begun its own service just recently. SEMTA should have stepped in before the city did, he thinks, and used that as the first step in a metropolitan system.

SEMTA SHOULD ALSO get used to the idea of having few passengers for awhile. A "public education" job will be necessary to sell people on the idea of riding buses.

This area is different from the East,

where people are used to it. This is the automobile capital of the world," Schiller points out. "People love to see a bus going down the street—just in case their car doesn't operate some day."

Mrs. Schiller adds: "We're about to become a three-car family ourselves."

The consultant's report for SEMTA makes no mention of the regional authority's going into charter service, and Northville Coach Lines would just as soon stay in that line of work.

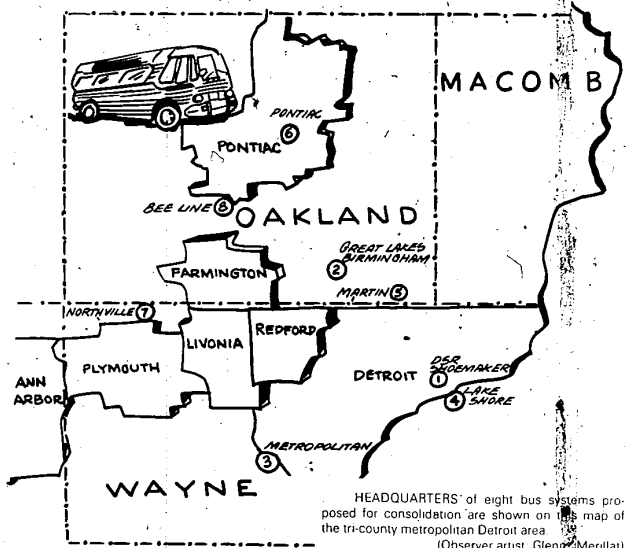
The major part of the company's revenues comes from charter service. Based on the number of contracts, schools are the biggest users—48 per cent of the contracts. Churches make up 16 per cent of the business, businesses 8 per cent, governmental agencies (e.g., the state hospital) 8 per cent, Girl Scouts 4 per cent, fraternal groups, 3, Masonic groups 2.5 and so on.

NORTHVILLE COACH LINE was begun in 1932, when Seven Mile was just a two-lane country road. At one time it carried passengers as far as Walled Lake, Keego Harbor and Monroe.

Schiller and two partners, Samuel Leib and Max Wolfe, in 1953 bought the company from Quentin Biddle, son of the founder. A few months ago, Leib and Wolfe bought out Schiller's interest, although he stays on as general manager.

As a passenger bus line, Northville Coach may be nearing the end of the road. The SEMTA study notes that "the concept of a regional authority functioning as the sole or predominant agency for the conduct of public transportation has met acceptance" in such areas as Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, St. Louis and Washington. And it adds:

"It was inevitable that this concept be adopted for Detroit."



HEADQUARTERS of eight bus systems proposed for consolidation are shown on the map of the tri-county metropolitan Detroit area. (Observer artist: Glenn Merritt)

The Observer Newspapers feel very deeply the responsibility for endorsing candidates for public office because the results of an election affect our democratic institutions even more than they influence the lives of the people we elect to run them.

The endorsements for Schoolcraft College Board of Trustees published in the Wednesday



editions of The Observer Newspapers through inadvertence did not follow our usual formal endorsement format or display prominently the source of the viewpoints expressed.

For these reasons we herein repeat the endorsements to avoid any misunderstanding among the voters.

TRUSTEES AT LARGE
Recommended: John Thomas, Garden City; Calvin Strom, Livonia.

Highly qualified: John LaRue, Livonia; Robert Swanson, Livonia; Robert Geake, Northville; Jerome Piskunov, Livonia.

PLYMOUTH REPRESENTATIVE
(Unexpired term)

Recommended: Mrs. Jane Moehs, Plymouth. Highly qualified: Eldon Martin, Plymouth.

We present these recommendations while urging that each voter equip himself with as much knowledge as he can obtain on each of the candidates before going to the polls Monday.

Reports from elections officials in the voting jurisdictions within the Schoolcraft College district indicate a light voter turnout is expected.

It is a tragic commentary that citizens become concerned only when a major crisis or controversy develops—issues which could be avoided in many cases by the careful selection of candidates at the polls.

—Observer Newspapers



ADOLF SCHILLER is general manager of Northville Coach Lines, Inc. (Observer photo by Harry Mauthe)

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