

# What now for rapid transit?

By TIM RICHARD

## analysis

"Where do we go from here?" leaders of the Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority are asking themselves and each other.

"Here" is last week's unexpected news that the Carter Administration plans to give SEMTA no more than the \$800 million for regional bus and rapid transit programs promised by the Ford administration prior to the 1976 election.

The problem is that \$600 million will help build light-rail rapid transit lines from downtown Detroit to about McChichols (Six Mile), if that far, and SEMTA had been talking about a \$2 billion-plus program that would send lines into the northern and eastern suburbs.

SEVERAL OPTIONS seem to be staring SEMTA in the face:

- Eliminate the Gratiot corridor light rail line and build only the Woodward corridor.

- Don't go underground for the downtown portion of the light rail lines.

- Stick to buses.

- Fight politically. The \$600 million promised by President Ford was the bottom of the barrel under existing law. So why not a new law with new funding?

CUTTING OUT Gratiot is a real possibility suggested by a high SEMTA

official who asked not to be quoted.

Politically, the problem is that many black politicians in Detroit see that line as benefiting them most by making suburban industrial jobs more accessible to their constituents.

The SEMTA official said Detroit Mayor Coleman Young might be inclined to go for the Gratiot line first, then come back later and argue for the Woodward line because the transportation need there is greater.

ELIMINATING subway portions of the transit plan could be a money-saver because it costs about 10 times as much to build underground as at the surface.

Indeed, the Oakland County Road Commission suggested a light rail plan entirely at street level, but SEMTA rejected it. SEMTA felt, among other things, that such routes would have to be too far off the beaten path to serve the public.

Meanwhile, however, national publications are predicting the United States has built its last mile of subway and the Carter Administration, devoted to balancing the budget by 1981, will fund no more subways.

And on Tuesday, John R. Gnu Jr.,

chairman of the Oakland County Road Commission, was in Washington to tell a Senate subcommittee:

"We are here to urge the committee to endorse a congressional ban on new transit systems that have underground elements, continuation of separate highway trust funding of highway systems, and funding of mass transit from general revenues."

LARRY SALCI, SEMTA general manager, sees a fundamental illogic in the Carter Administration's capping of regional transit funds at \$800 million.

"It's bad planning," said Salci. On one hand, the federal government pledges enough money to start two transit lines; on the other, it doesn't come through with the funds to finish them.

"We're not sure Atlanta will get more than 13 or 14 miles of transit instead of the 53 miles the people were sold. The Georgia governor says we (officials) have a credibility problem," Salci said.

Salci added ruefully: "Systems of \$2 billion or \$3 billion are clearly out of the ball park."

"A POLITICAL meeting" was suggested by SEMTA board member Joseph P. Bianco of Bloomfield Hills.

"Let's not get stuck with only \$600 million, but let's recognize a tighter

federal posture," said Bianco, the board's senior member in years of service.

SEMTA Chairman Tom Turner of Detroit quoted Transportation Secretary Brock Adams as saying further legislation is necessary to bring more federal money into public transportation. With the federal government providing 80 per cent of the funding, no state or region can build anything significant itself.

SEMTA has other problems. The same letter from the Urban Mass Transit Administration which capped SEMTA's funds at \$800 million pointed to some of the work still to be done.

UMTA is unhappy that SEMTA has yet to negotiate a merger with Detroit's Department of Transportation, although SEMTA officials blame the slowness on Mayor Young's administration.

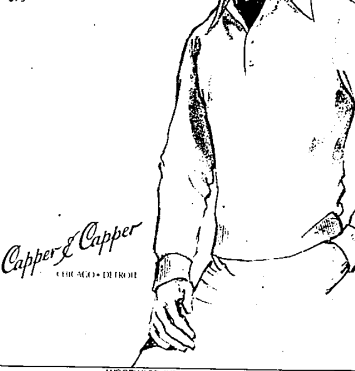
Salci added that UMTA criticized "conflicting land use policies. Two or three new parking garages are going up in downtown Detroit and are an inducement to autos, not transit."

Finally, SEMTA must come up with more local funds for its further plans, which won't begin to be covered by last year's \$25 million package passed by the Michigan Legislature.

Salci summed it up: "We've got to get our act together."

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