

No new money from feds

Subway backers eyeing scaled-down plans

By MIKE SCANLON

For nearly 10 grueling years, suburban and Detroit interests have slugged each other senseless in a no-decision battle over the proposed Woodward corridor light rail transit line.

They can't afford that luxury anymore. A scaled-down subway plan may be in the offing following Washington meetings last week between President Reagan's transportation administrators, state and regional officials.

The Woodward rapid transit line, alone budgeted at \$807 million, was to have been the centerpiece in a proposed \$1.5 billion regional 1990 transit plan that would have included commuter rail, bus service and a \$118 million downtown people mover. The rail line's subway portion — from downtown Detroit to Six Mile — had been the center of the slugfest.

Reagan administrators, transit officials learned last week that southeast Michigan appears still in line for some \$600 million in transit aid promised in 1976 by the Ford administration.

The bad news is no new aid commitment is likely under Reagan, and the previous aid won't be approved by itself to pay for the old plan.

The Southeast Michigan Transportation Authority (SEMTA) still hasn't figured out exactly how big the budget cuts will have to be, but a spokesperson said it's already making plans for making cuts. Any new transit plan will have to run the same staged gauntlet of bureaucratic approval as the existing plan did.

"There aren't many choices," summed up U.S. Rep. Carl Pursell, R-Plymouth, a member of the appropriations subcommittee on transportation. "Either you don't come up with any program or you compromise."

"The dollars are absolutely not going to be there, so it's just backing off and seeing if you can salvage anything," agreed Edward McNamara, a SEMTA

board member and mayor of Livonia. "I think we all recognize the honeymoon's over."

"I think Detroit's going to recognize they just don't have the same swat they had before, the same pull," added McNamara.

TAKING SHAPE now is a cheaper transit plan, with much of the cost-savings likely to occur in a downward revision of the Woodward rail system. Or more literally, an upward revision.

Building below-ground light rail — subways — costs a lot more than building ground-level light rail. SEMTA is studying big reductions in the subway portion of the Woodward rail line, perhaps with underground segments limited to downtown south of the Fisher Freeway and in Highland Park between the Davison Freeway and Six Mile.

Also under consideration is a reduction in stations, especially underground stations which also cost many times more than ground-level stops. A rail bridge over Eight Mile at Woodward may also be abandoned.

Earlier proposals would have run surface rail north to 11 Mile, but a 10 Mile Road outer boundary is now being studied, the spokesperson said.

HIGHER FARES than earlier projected also appear likely in the wake of a Reagan decision to eliminate federal operating revenue aid by 1985, the spokesperson added.

Transit officials are studying a proposal to set fares at 50 percent of operating costs, Pursell said, a substantially higher figure than the 30 percent fare recovery he said was typical nationally.

Even the already-committed \$600 million in federal construction money will likely be delayed for another year under the latest Reagan budget proposals, but SEMTA General Manager Larry Salci said the delay won't hurt. Transit spending for the next 15 months will probably be limited to about \$15 million in preliminary engineering, he said.

"We don't come on stream for big money this year," Salci said. "We are still in the ballgame."

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— Edward McNamara

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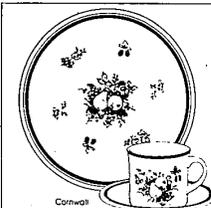
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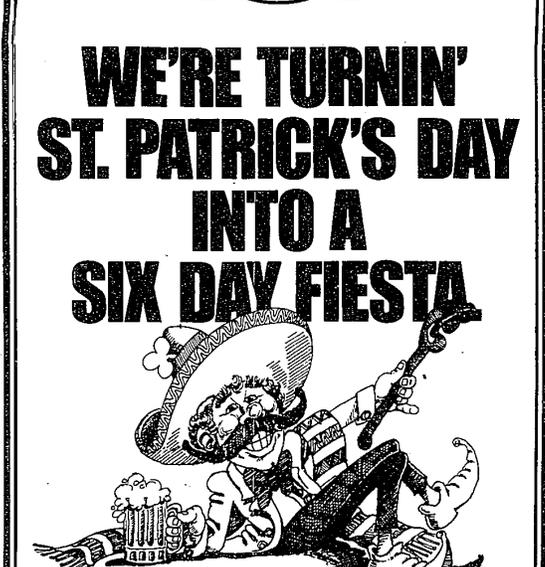
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