

Local officials told

Bumpy roads for cars, transit

By Suzie Rollins Singer
staff writer

Transportation in Oakland County, either by car or bus, is not going to be easy during the upcoming fiscal year.

"We anticipate a strike by our employees," said John Grubba, managing director of the Oakland County Road Commission. "This is certainly not a good time for wage demands, and I don't think things will get better."

Grubba and representatives of the Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority (SEMTA) told a group of Southfield elected officials Monday that the road to transportation funding is long, narrow and bumpy.

"WE'VE CUT out our construction program entirely," Grubba said.

The road commission won't seek a funding referendum this November to help ease its money woes, like SEMTA is planning.

"We can't," Grubba explained. "Our constitution says we can't ask the voters for operating money. The road commission uses money from gasoline and weight taxes to operate its roads — but that's down by \$50 million."

Grubba said the road board has agreed to keep making budget cuts so it always operates with a balanced budget.

"The board has established a policy that it won't borrow money," he added.

SEMTA, ON the other hand, will face a \$41 million loss beginning in July if President Reagan cuts federal funds for public transportation as planned, said Gary Krause, general manager of the seven-county authority.

If that's the case, SEMTA hopes to ask the voters to help ease the burden. "First we have to get the Legislature to amend our legislation (Act 204) to make a provision for us to increase our operating budget by taxing," Krause said.

"That may not occur this year at all, but if it does then we could concentrate on putting together a regional referendum."

SEMTA'S MONEY woes are no secret. The authority receives its operating budget from the fare box, the state budget and federal operating assistance.

"The president has stated his intention to reduce federal operating funds over the next two years and eliminate federal operating assistance completely by fiscal year 1985," Krause said.

"Next year, our budget will be unbalanced by 15 percent for the second half of the year (if the cuts go through)," he added.

Assuming that the federal phase-out will occur, that state revenues aren't increased and that the SEMTA tax (fees collected

from license plate sales and title transfers) continues to be held up in court, more cuts are imminent, Krause warned.

If the request to the Legislature fails, or if the referendum fails, Krause anticipates about two-thirds of SEMTA's existing service will be cut during the upcoming year.

Last March, SEMTA made major budget cuts, including layoffs, which decreased bus service 20 percent.

BECAUSE BUDGET and service cuts are becoming a way of life for most public agencies, John Amberger, executive director of the Southeastern Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG), recommended several cost-saving measures.

"Joint purchasing through a state system is a good idea. Or we've seen it done through cities or counties," Amberger explained.

"School districts do the best job of consolidating purchasing. They buy all the school's supplies and in effect sell them to the individual schools," he said.

"Public works departments in neighboring cities could share garages for vehicle repairs, and some police and fire departments have gotten into joint police and fire dispatching, which has saved a lot of money," he explained.

Money can be saved, but it takes cooperation, Amberger noted.

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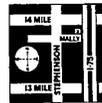
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