

Workers handicapped plead for transit

By Kathy Parrish
staff writer

Since 1973, widow Aretha Banks has taken a bus every day from Detroit to her job as a domestic in West Bloomfield.

Birmingham resident Mary Serpen- to, 63, travels daily by bus to her Detroit paralegal job, which took a year to find because it had to be near public transportation.

Because neither can afford a car, bus cuts designated by the Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority (SEMTA) could mean big problems for them.

To tell SEMTA directors about their plight, they bused downtown Monday to attend a public hearing.

They were joined by 140 other tri-county residents — many too poor to buy cars or handicapped and unable to drive. Those who volunteered to talk spoke against a SEMTA proposal to do away with a \$16 million deficit.

THE PLAN would eliminate the commuter train, cut administrative staff and reduce the number of buses serving Oakland, Macomb and Wayne counties.

"We're making cuts with deep regret because we know the adverse effect they will have on passengers, our employees, vendors and the entire region," said SEMTA general manager Gary Krause, who fielded questions during the day-long session. "But we feel we have no choice."

Meeting from 10:35 a.m. to 4:20 p.m. in Veterans Memorial Building in Detroit, SEMTA officials heard from a steady stream of speakers who rely on SEMTA for transportation.

For some — who use wheelchairs, walkers or canes — public transportation is their only mobility.

Bus and train employees, representatives of agencies which depend on SEMTA service and those concerned about the future of area transit also attended the hearing.

PLEAS WERE HEARD from individuals whose paychecks depend on public transportation.

Bus driver Lenore Tyler put in a

word for her Oakland County riders. She said the riders should have more notice. "You've done this too fast without enough thought. This time you haven't given the public enough time to figure this all out."

"If you want to get this transportation thing going, you need to start thinking of the public and not just using the public."

"THE CUTS would pose severe hardship on people like me who can't afford a car," said Serpen- to, who would have to walk several blocks from the bus to her Birmingham home. "Have you ever walked a mile in rain or snow?"

Banks said the bus she takes from Detroit to West Bloomfield is filled with widows and other single heads of households. "It's eliminated, that would be a real hardship on those people," she said.

SOME RIDERS who can afford cars told SEMTA officials that buses make commuting easier and urged that express services like Park and Ride and the train from Pontiac to Detroit be continued.

"I'm particularly distressed that it seems all means of getting to the downtown area except the Woodward corridor are eliminated," said Rochester resident Gerald Boeberitz, who parks his car in a mall lot and rides downtown on the 842 Park and Ride.

Others, such as Ed Fleischmann of Bloomfield Hills, prefer the commuter train. The treasurer of Detroit Renaissance sees commuter rail as part of a balanced regional transportation system.

"To accomplish anything will require good faith and a willingness to accept change from all interested parties," said Fleischmann. He suggested updating train schedules, closing lightly used stations, rebuilding electrically heated cars and re-examining maintenance procedures.

"There is, of course, no guarantee that the process will succeed, but we must try. It would be a real and lasting shame if we lost the train because at a crucial point in time we failed to try hard enough."



These commuters waiting for the SEMTA train will have to find new transportation methods if proposed SEMTA cuts go into effect.

FOR A NUMBER of speakers, though, jobs aren't the issue. Handicaps make it impossible for them to get anywhere by car.

"You don't care for the poor, the handicapped, the middle income — but we need the transportation. We can't be hibernated," said Jennie DiGregorio of Waterford, who was applauded as she leaned on a walker to speak. The senior citizen travels to downtown Detroit daily by SEMTA connector and large

bus from Pontiac Mall. In an angry speech — which also was applauded by onlookers — Detroit James Turner said the cuts will limit inner city residents' access to jobs and other opportunities in the suburbs.

"I've lived abroad and lived in third world nations which have a better transportation system than Detroit," said Turner, who teaches robotics at Oakland Community College's Auburn Hills campus.

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