

Optimistic SEMTA plans to expand transit

By Kathy Parrish
staff writer

Senior citizens who live in Royal Oak Manor said they just want their Twelve Mile bus service back so they can get to the doctor or shopping.

But, the Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority (SEMTA) has bigger goals.

Despite drastic cutbacks in October which eliminated the commuter rail and reduced staff and bus service, SEMTA's board Tuesday approved a major transportation expansion plan for the seven-county region.

Along with adding small and large buses and "transit centers" in regional activity areas like shopping malls or employment sites, the plan calls for light rail rapid transit on Gratiot to Mt. Clemens, on Woodward from Detroit to Pontiac and the Silverdome, a downtown Detroit people mover and commuter rail to Ann Arbor.

The regional plan also includes additional connector buses in Livingston,

Monroe and St. Clair counties. Local bus service in Port Huron and Westland would be expanded.

SEMTA BOARD Chairman Dewitt J. Henry admitted it "may seem ironic" to talk about expansion when service is reduced. But he believes voters will pay to get a system they can use.

As reasons for the new services, a SEMTA report cited needs of a growing number of households, elderly, young, handicapped and low income residents. It also noted the move to the suburbs, a growing number of daily trips and an increase in service industry workers who rely on public transit. While Detroit is the largest employment center, the cities of Dearborn, Livonia, Pontiac, Southfield, Troy and Warren have become regional employment and population centers.

"We hope people want newer and better services. Let's put together a package they want," urged Henry, a Wayne County representative from the downriver area.

"This plan will become the centerpiece for rallying people together in a discussion of public transit and what it means to this region."

* TO MAKE room for all of those interested in the plan, the board left its usual downtown meeting room for the roomier Engineering Society of Detroit building. Henry called the room change appropriate because society members "will help to build what we hope will be one of the most efficient transit systems in the nation today."

Tuesday's session was an upbeat one for the board, which was forced to dismantle some of its system last fall to offset a \$16 million operating deficit. SEMTA eliminated the commuter train, reduced buses and routes and raised the youth fare 25 cents.

As adopted, the consensus plan was almost exactly like the original one presented last spring in public hearings.

Backing it were representatives of the Greater Detroit Chamber of Commerce, Metropolitan Detroit Visitors and Convention Bureau and Detroit Renaissance.

Also speaking for it was Elizabeth Arden, a "senior consumer" appearing for the 276 residents of Royal Oak Manor senior citizen residence.

"Those of us who are capable of being independent need transportation to maintain our health and take care of our needs," said Arden, who favored the plan with restoration of the cut back Twelve Mile bus service.

SEMTA BOARD member John Peterson, who represents the Oakland County Board of Commissioners, read a statement which was added to the plan.

The Rochester resident asked that no significant element of the plan, other than the federally funded people mover, be implemented without a vote of the citizens for operating funds.

If the election failed in Oakland County, no taxes would be levied there, and the county would receive no SEMTA service, he said.

Peterson also asked that capital and operating funds be allocated by SEMTA equitably among the counties.

The expansion would take place only after services cut last fall are restored. There are no plans to put the commuter rail between Pontiac and Detroit back in place.

AFTER UNANIMOUS approval by a voice vote of the SEMTA board, the plan's fate now rests with the state Legislature, which would have to allow the authority to go to voters for an operating tax. SEMTA has no taxing authority of its own.

SEMTA is applying for federal and state capital funds to buy the light rail systems.

The authority intends to place ads in area newspapers to explain the plan to the public.

It also has hired a North Carolina firm, DeVries and Associates, to set up a strategy plan/public information program on the need for a local source of operating funds.

"IT WILL BE a very difficult fight. There's no doubt about it," acknowledged SEMTA General Manager Gary Krause.

"But it was important to establish what we wanted."

Krause said SEMTA's 1979 plan was adopted by a split vote. And even last year when the plan was first presented, there was not agreement between members.

"We're done debating a whole lot about what the plan consists of. Now our job is educating the public."

Plan for Oakland County

SEMTA's board of directors adopted a plan which calls for these transit improvements in Oakland County:

• Light rail on Woodward from Detroit to Pontiac and the Silverdome.

• 63 small Connector buses.

• 65 fixed-route large buses.

• An increasingly east/west fixed-route bus service orientation with express, local and Connector service.

• "Transit centers" (where various modes of transportation could in-

terconnect) in Novi, Farmington Hills, Southfield, Royal Oak, Troy, Birmingham, Rochester, Pontiac/Waterford and West Bloomfield.

The plan calls for Detroit to receive: Additional small Connector buses, 154 fixed-route large buses (18-percent increase in vehicle miles), light rail on Woodward, light rail on Gratiot, 19 transit stations (not including light rail stations), a Downtown people mover, a commuter rail to Ann Arbor.



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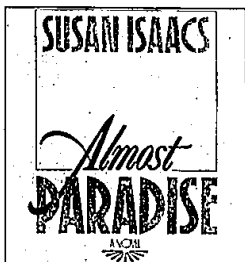
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