

# All aboard, New Yorkers!

By Kathy Parrish  
staff writer

It still bears the black logo and orange and red stripes of Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority (SEMTA). But the "Detroit" train car no longer carries area suburbanites downtown. It's now a bar car where New York workers sip drinks on the way home to Danbury, Conn.

And the "Birmingham," "Bingham Farms," and "Troy" cars all carry Poughkeepsie commuters along the Hudson River to jobs in the Big Apple. While their SEMTA logos are still intact, the familiar cars aren't likely ever again to carry residents of the cities they're named for.

A lawsuit aimed at getting Detroit commuters back aboard is being considered by the Michigan Court of Appeals, which Oct. 9 heard railroad buffs argue that the service is needed.

MEANWHILE, the train cars and some of the shelters commuters huddled under are gone. And the commuter rail's future looks even bleaker today than on the freezing afternoon a year ago when service ended.

"It's a lovely way to commute, but very expensive," said Julian Wolfe, SEMTA's coordinator of rail planning.

"It's been a year now. It's gone."

Trying to offset a \$16 million deficit, SEMTA in October 1983 cut the number of buses and eliminated the commuter train.

Commuters rode home by train for the last time Oct. 17, 1983. On Oct. 22 the Bluewater Michigan Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society ran a special SEMTA train from Detroit to Dayton, Ohio.

In January, all 22 operable SEMTA cars were leased to Metro-North Commuter Railroad, a public agency which is a subsidiary of the New York Metro Transit Authority. Metro-North is responsible for all the commuter trains that run in and out of Grand Central Terminal.

PULLED BY diesel locomotives, the SEMTA cars carry about 200,000 commuters daily. Metro-North pays \$300,000 yearly for use of the vehicles.

"People there like the trains very much," said Wolfe, who was SEMTA's commuter rail manager.

"The cars are a little old fashioned but very well maintained."

Although the cars are leased and can be returned to this area on 60 days notice, there are no plans to bring them home soon.

They are expected to serve New York commuters for another year. Then Metro-North will get brand new cars and return the 1949-50 vintage ones.

The five SEMTA locomotives are waiting in the Pontiac Coach Storage and Maintenance Facility.

BUT THE WOOD shelter and platform at Milwaukee Junction station serving the New Center area has been taken down, as has the platform which served the Chrysler facility in Highland Park. The Royal Oak station is being used by Grand Trunk and Western Railroad, and the Birmingham station is now Norman's Elton Street Restaurant.

Making things even more complicated, all the high seniority railroad employees who worked on the commuter rail are either retired or working in freight for Grand Trunk.

At a SEMTA board meeting last week, authority staffers made it clear that the train is not even in the plans any more.

Oakland County planning division manager Philip Dondoro asked what it would cost in dollars and time to reinstate the commuter rail.

The Oakland board member was told bringing the service back "as it was" would run \$1 million to \$2 million and take six to nine months.

MAKING IT competitive would cost several million dollars and mean major track improvements and new and more modern cars, said staffer John Sajovec, SEMTA's director of planning and engineering.

"You also must be aware there would be operating costs. And we just don't have it," added Albert Martin, SEMTA acting general manager.

As coordinator of rail planning, Julian Wolfe is looking into the possibility of SEMTA offering rail service between Detroit and Ann Arbor.

Previously provided by Amtrak, there is no longer commuter service on that train route.

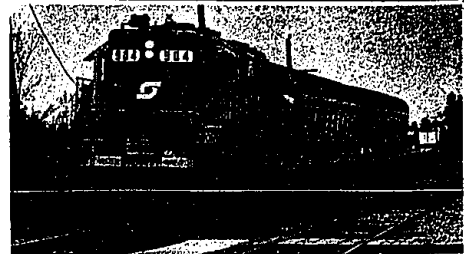
Wolfe plans to make a presentation soon on the subject, but won't guess at the outcome. "It certainly is a possible thing, but again it takes money," he said.

MEANWHILE, the determined Michigan Association of Railroad Passengers is waiting to hear from the Michigan Court of Appeals on its request for a hearing in which SEMTA would "show cause" for ending the train. MARP also asked for reinstatement of the commuter rail.

The statewide group appealed after an Oakland County Circuit Court refused MARP's request to compel SEMTA to continue running the train.

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(O7A)



GARY CASKEY/staff photographer

SEMTA train cars, like the 904 that carried commuters to Birmingham a year ago, now transport New York City commuters.

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