



OBSERVATION POINT

DISSENT

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By SHERRY KAHAN

Railroads Are Far From Answer To Need For Mass Transit System

There has been a lot of talk out here in the suburbs about the need for a metropolitan area mass transit system. You know, buses or trains or something that would transport the public from the suburbs into Detroit and back again without the daily thrash on the clogged ditches.

Such a system is desperately needed; the need will grow enormously in the coming years as our suburban communities grow in population.

The general theory in Detroit is that mass transit has been blocked by the big auto companies (General Motors is most prominently mentioned), on grounds that people who ride on mass transit won't be buying as many cars as they would if there were no such system.

This theory remains unproven. (In fact, I suspect that the reduced demand for cars that a mass transit system in this area would produce is less than a drop in the bucket of the total demand for cars in this country.) But the very existence of the theory points up the curious fact that the Detroit area is one of the very few metropolitan areas in this country without a mass transit system.

ONE OF THE possible ways such a system might work is through the railroads. Using existing rail beds, they would establish stations in the suburbs, serving commuter traffic to and from Detroit.

Having just spent a few days in New York, where the railroads run the main mass transit system to the suburbs, let me say that if we let the railroads get hold of our mass transit system the result would be catastrophe!

I traveled from Grand Central Station to Stamford, Conn., on the New Haven Railroad, which in turn is controlled by the Penn Central Railroad.

The ticket was expensive (over \$5 for two of us, traveling some 40 miles.) The station was grimy, and the cars were indescribable. Paint was falling off; broken windows had not been fixed; seats would not work; air conditioning was either non-existent or non-operative; rust showed everywhere. The conductor was surly (they must have a surly training school somewhere for all new conductors).

The ride was long and rough. In short, I'd prefer to face the ditches rather than go through that horror show every day.

ALL THIS WAS so, despite the fact that rail is still the cheapest land transportation per ton-mile.

The railroads (including the Penn Central) are screaming to be allowed to cut further commuter services, on the ground that they lose money.

What the railroads don't explain (including particularly the

Penn Central, now undergoing bankruptcy proceedings) is what they did with all the money they made off their freight and passenger operations in the past. The strong suspicion exists that they funneled their profits out of the rail business and into other areas (real estate, tourism, land development) where they sensed a greater profit potential.

Failing to plough back profits into new cars or better passenger service, the railroads then discovered that they were losing customers to airplanes and buses.

Now they turn around and try to get the federal government (i.e. us, the taxpayers) to get them off the hook by guaranteeing loans and eliminating the last vestiges of commuter service.

It seems to me that the recent history of such railroads is one of irresponsible management, compounded with equal parts of inefficiency and gall. Given the amazing store of ill-will the railroads have managed to accumulate over the past years, I wouldn't be surprised if Penn Central were allowed to slide into the drink with few tears shed anywhere.

A NUMBER OF other local railroads, although not in the same trouble as the Penn Central,

Tim Richard writes

Finances For SEMTA Poses Big Problem

Item: Earlier this year, the privately-owned Northville Coach Line went under financially. After a period of hardship, notably for some state hospital employees, a Toledo firm was able to restore service, although it remains to be seen how it will work out.

Item: Detroit voters repealed a city charter provision that the DSR bus system must be financed entirely by the farebox. This opens the door to a subsidy from taxes.

Item: The DSR on July 25 canceled its Middle Belt Road run from Metropolitan Airport to the Livonia Mall, blaming a \$465 daily loss, and suburban officials are scratching their heads in an effort to figure out a way to subsidize or replace it.

Item: A year or so ago, Ann Arbor's privately-owned bus company called it quits. A city subsidy now helps support a limited service with small van-type buses.

Item: Pontiac is subsidizing its bus service to prevent its collapse.

Item: Port Huron's bus system has terminated operations.

AND YET ironically, the need for public transit is growing.

have not been entirely public spirited about the way they conduct their business.

The C & O tracks running through Livonia and, especially, Plymouth, have been a source of local cussing for years.

The railroad's management has made sympathetic noises about the traffic tie-ups that their trains cause; some scheduling changes have been made to reduce traffic during daytime hours.

However, on the key point of railroad crossing underpasses, the railroad has refused to pay. Both Plymouth and Livonia lack the money. So the motorists wait.

So, too, do the commuters who are now almost entirely forced to get to Detroit by car, since the C & O cut back its commuter service from Plymouth some time ago.

On the plus side, the Grand Trunk and Western Railroad has operated a commuter service through Birmingham into Detroit for some time. They promoted and put some money into improved service and rolling stock. I understand they are doing fairly well with it.

Which all goes to show: In business, as in anything else, if you treat the other guy with scorn and don't keep trying to do a better job — you get what you deserve.

IMPOSSIBLE DREAM?



start on the hard planning and engineering design of an operating public-transportation system....

"The facts of life in public transportation today, here as in every other metropolitan area, tell us that the potential operating revenue... will not be enough... to fully support their daily operations, much less the cost of acquiring and improving them....

"There can be no substitute for a strong state-local source of financial support if SEMTA is to do its job."

Clearly, it's up to the Legislature and an enlightened electorate to make some hard decisions not just to study grants but on how to give SEMTA a reliable source of income.

That will mean some tax money. There is no alternative.

Dennis L. Pajot writes

Raps Action Of SC Board

Six members of the Schoolcraft Community College Board of Trustees, a panel not distinguished for its courtesy, have committed a grave insult — one which probably will color the college relations for a long, long time.

Unfortunately, the color is likely to be a discredit, rather than a credit to Schoolcraft.

In their zeal to exercise a rightful power, the board members have jeopardized their own influence as a stabilizing and guiding panel for the public institution.

And, in the process, they managed to place two persons whom they probably hoped to honor in a position to be unfairly trampled.

IF IT WOULD DO any good, this writer would urge the six trustees to retract their action of Thursday, July 30, adding three of their own choices to the four presidential candidates recommended by a college-community search committee.

It wouldn't do any good. Instead, let it merely be pointed out that the board could have waited an appropriate time before adding its names. Even after such a wait, additions would still reflect upon the committee — but not in the harsh, heavy handed manner of a stern patriarch disciplining a knave.

With such a wait, the trustees could have saved the college community from a potentially explosive controversy and at

least have shielded two persons whose professional reputations stand to be tainted by the force of the impact.

AS IT IS, with their abrupt insult of the committee, the six trustees have invited a defensive reaction that is sure to sweep together the already rampant issue of "board repression of campus voices" and attacks upon personalities.

With a wait, if there were to be critical reactions, the two controversies could have been at least separated and less damaging.

Trustees' Jane K. Moelke, Paul Mutnick, Clarke Oldenburg, Dr. Robert Geake, Dr. George Martin and John LaRue, should jointly take the blame for their unanimous action of Thursday, July 30.

The pity is, because any penalty that might come would touch them latest and least, they will not.

Community-college relations, the college image, the trust of the administration, faculty, students, foundation, alumni and their own constituents have all been damaged. Damaged trust always has far-reaching and unpredictable results.

If the controversy takes the turn at least one source indicates it will, the very men the board apparently sought to honor will be the center of challenge and therefore exposed to undue tarnish.

All for the lack of a little courtesy.

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