

SEMTA asks sales tax vote

By Kathy Parrish
staff writer

Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority (SEMTA) would like the state sales tax raised to subsidize its services.

But while urging that voters tax themselves to operate public transportation, SEMTA isn't saying how much that tax increase should be.

After debating for months about ways to finance the troubled operation, SEMTA's board of directors Tuesday officially backed a sales tax hike as the "dedicated source of public funds to support public transit."

THIS WEEK'S resolution was more general than one tabled a month ago by

the board. The first proposal asked the legislature to ask voters for a constitutional amendment increasing the Michigan sales tax one cent for public transportation upgrading and improvement.

SEMTA was created by the legislature as a seven-county transportation authority but never has been given a revenue source of its own. It is dependent on state and federal subsidies.

During the '80s, the Reagan Administration, though committed to capital outlays for transit facilities, has steadily reduced operating subsidies — resulting in SEMTA's search for its own source of operating revenue.

WHILE APPROVING the sales tax concept, SEMTA's board made it clear the tax should be approved by the public.

Under the Michigan Constitution, the sales tax is fixed at 4 percent. An increase would have to come through a constitutional amendment approved by voters.

Phillip W. Dondero, who represents the Oakland County commissioners on the SEMTA board, got an amendment to the recommendation clearly spelling out that a vote would be taken on the tax.

Dondero, manager of Oakland County's Planning Division, was tabling of last month's resolution because he wanted to get public reaction on it first.

"Everybody wants a vote. You have to be darn sure you put something like this in front of the people and give them a chance to vote," said Dondero.

"You must have a good solid constituency."

DONDERO ALSO asked that the resolution be trimmed from three pages to one page. That cut out nine "whereas" paragraphs outlining reasons for the tax.

"Don't clutter peoples' minds," suggested Dondero. "Those things come when it's put on the ballot. Just let people know the SEMTA board supports the concept of the tax."

Agreeing with him was director Malcolm Dade, a Detroit representative. "This reaffirms this has to be done by vote of the people — no more, no less. I don't know that any more or less is needed," Dade said.

C of C president opposes assessing for People Mover

By Tim Richard
staff writer

A major spokesman for downtown Detroit business opposes a federal proposal to assess business for cost overruns on SEMTA's Downtown People Mover transit project.

But Frank Smith, president of the Greater Detroit Chamber of Commerce, was lukewarm to the prospect of SEMTA's selling shares of stock to private investors to cover the capital deficiencies. "I wouldn't set it aside as impossible," he said in an interview.

"We have consistently said we'd be opposed to a special-benefit (assessment) district," said Smith, reacting to a proposal by two federal officials.

The idea of assessing benefitting downtown businesses for the cost overruns came from U.S. Rep. Carl Pursell, R-Plymouth, who guided the People Mover project through Congress. It was endorsed by Ralph Stanley, head of the Urban Mass Transportation Agency. And it is being considered by state Sen. Richard Fessler, R-West Bloomfield, who heads the Senate Transportation Committee.

THE SEMTA project was designed

to cost \$137 million, and the general contract is set at that amount when awarded in 1982. Meanwhile, changes in city and private business building plans caused SEMTA to redesign the elevated, automated transit line. Current total is anticipated to be \$192 million.

The federal government is committed to covering 80 percent of the construction cost, and the Michigan Department of Transportation to 20 percent — leaving a capital shortfall of \$55 million.

UMTA's Stanley is taking a hard line against providing more than \$5.4 million additional, though Pursell has his eye on getting up to \$22 million.

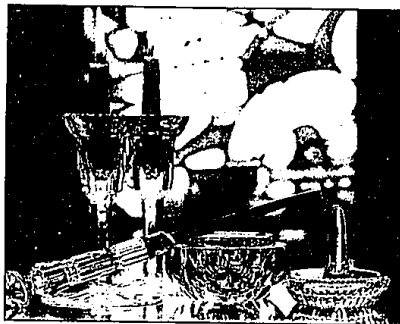
Even the most optimistic SEMTA forecast shows at least \$33 million must be raised.

Should business just give SEMTA the money?

"That doesn't make any sense," Smith replied. "I can't conceive of a circumstance that would lead business to put forward grants to a public service."

If highways, sewers, streetlights and other public capital needs are financed by government, then the People Mover should be, too, he said.

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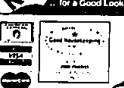
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