

SEMTA eyes overhaul of transit plan

By Kathy Parriash
staff writer

A transit study planned by Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG) for next year may get underway now.

SEMCOG's Executive Committee will vote tomorrow whether to start the planned Southeast Michigan Trans-

it Policy Plan immediately. The seven county study of transit was scheduled for 1986.

At a meeting of Oakland County SEMCOG members Tuesday, Executive Director John M. Amberger said the transit study will analyze existing needs, governance and financing.

"It's a generic plan. We want to look at what's needed and various ways

those needs could be fulfilled," Amberger told the gathering in Bloomfield Township Hall.

SEMCOG REGULARLY undertakes transportation studies of area roads and corridors.

It has, though, left implementation and planning of transit to the Southeastern Michigan Transportation

Authority (SEMATA).

But Amberger said SEMCOG has been urged to take a good look at the financially troubled authority, which has cut back bus service drastically and experienced spiraling construction costs with its Downtown People Mover (DPM).

SEMATA has announced it plans to shut down between October and February if it fails to get either a renewal of federal operating aid or voter approval of a local tax subsidy.

"There isn't anyone I know who thinks SEMATA could pass a sales tax this year," said Amberger. He suggested the only chance for the tax would be if counties could purchase the service they desire instead of having SEMATA decide where to place buses.

"We need to try to get more information

on the table to false dialogue between the city and suburbs."

FARMINGTON HILLS delegate JoAnn Soronen, who is SEMCOG's representative to SEMATA from Oakland County, said she would object to an attempt to change the authority's so-called "Consensus Plan."

Outlining goals for transit in the region, the plan includes light rail and the DPM.

"That was a program put together with great difficulty and still supported by three counties. It's one positive thing SEMATA has going for it," said Soronen, who is also on the Farmington Hills Council.

"It's not the end-all or be-all. But it is an agreement three counties came to on behalf of better mass transit in the region."

"For years we've not said anything

about SEMATA because it was either on the verge of success or disaster," answered Amberger.

"But I think this would be helpful. We're approaching it not to cause trouble for SEMATA but to get more information on the table."

BLOOMFIELD TOWNSHIP Supervisor Fred Korzon, whose community hosted the meeting, supported the study. He suggested that SEMCOG could "stand back and look at this (transit) objectively."

"I think the Consensus Plan is a myth. I think it was just approved to get a vote on the ballot," said the delegate.

"I don't think there's been a consensus for light rail anywhere."

Amberger said the study could look not just at transit needs, but alternatives in governing and financing it.

People Mover aid asked

Thomas Turner, chairman of the SEMTA board of directors, is urging the Michigan Legislature to act quickly on transportation authority's request for additional money to complete construction of the Downtown People Mover (DPM).

SEMTA needs \$72.5 million to complete the \$210 million, 2.9-mile overhead transit loop around downtown Detroit, Turner said. He is asking \$13.2 million from the state Legislature, with the remaining money provided primarily by the federal government and the City of Detroit.

"If the Legislature acts now," Turner said, "it will permit the continuation of economic growth and development in

Detroit, and by extension, the rest of the southeast Michigan area.

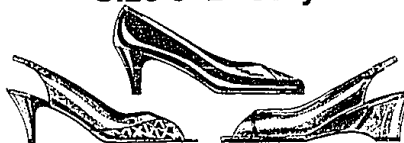
"Failure to act will add to the final cost of the project, will prohibit SEMTA from issuing contracts for the continuation of work, and will ultimately bring the project to a halt."

"The DPM project has already helped attract \$345 million in new investment to downtown Detroit, and more private capital is waiting in the wings."

The state's original share of the \$137 million project was about \$30 million. But the total cost has risen to the current estimate of \$210 million because design changes were made in mid-stream.

Turner and Acting General Manager Albert Martin will meet with House Speaker Gary Owen to further discuss the DPM funding situation.

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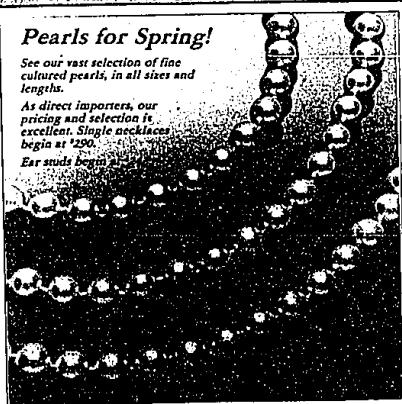


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