

# Improving Transit in Southeast Michigan:

## A Framework for Action

### Summary

July 2001

**Mission: To make transit a  
convenient and desirable travel  
option for people throughout  
Southeast Michigan**



**SEMCOG** . . . Local Governments Advancing Southeast Michigan

Southeast Michigan Council of Governments

# Improving Transit in Southeast

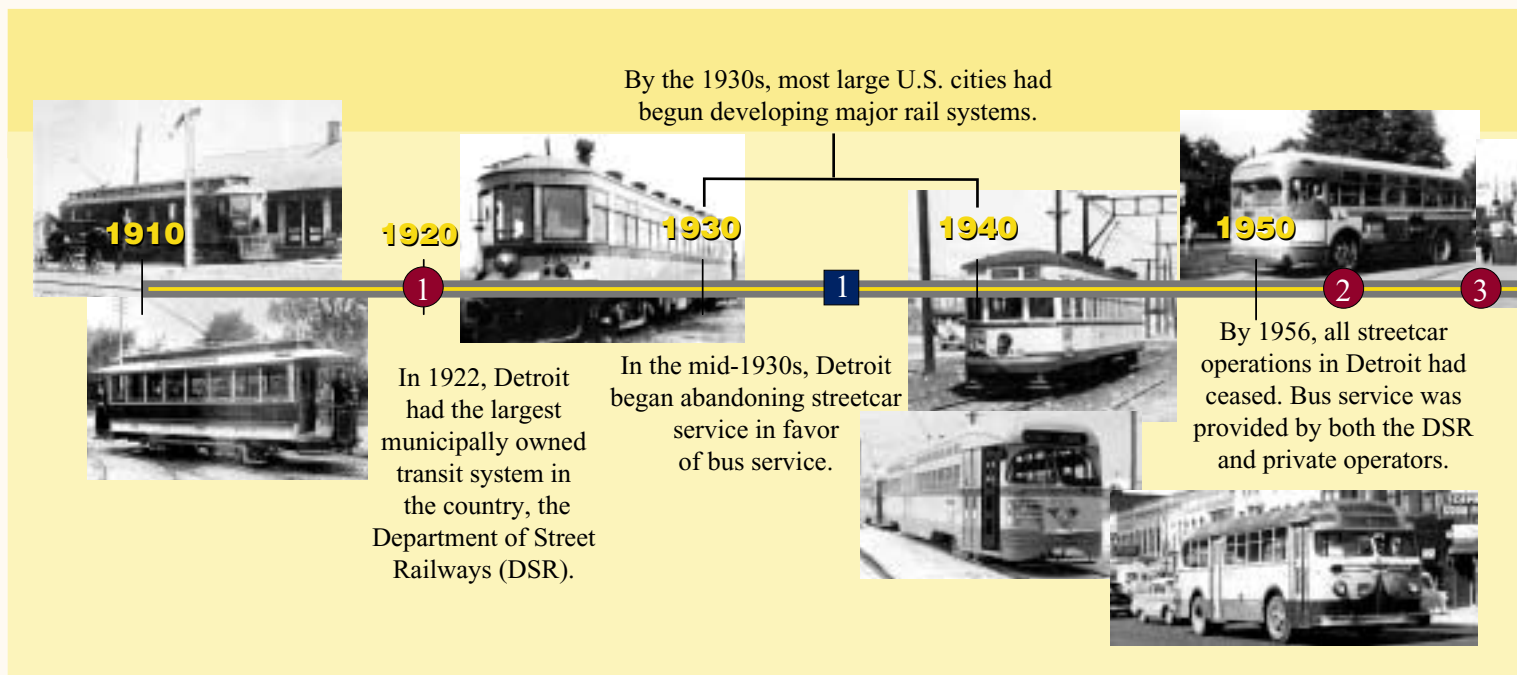
***Southeast Michigan needs a reliable and efficient public transit system.*** Such a system is absolutely essential for the quality of life and prosperity of the region.

It is important that we provide affordable public transportation to people who do not have access to motor vehicles. It is also important to provide a viable transportation option to those who usually drive.

Enhanced transit can complement the current transportation system. As we do not have the money to build our way out of congestion, an enhanced transit system can play a role in reducing traffic congestion, fuel consumption, and air pollution.

Thriving metropolitan areas have good transit systems. As we position ourselves for future growth, an enhanced transit system will improve our region's economic competitiveness and our ability to attract business, industry, workers, and tourists.

## A brief history of transit



### ● Transit plans developed for Southeast Michigan

- 1** In 1920, the Detroit Rapid Transit Commission prepared the first regional transportation plan, recommending a multimodal system.
- 2** In 1953, the *Detroit Metropolitan Area Transportation Study* was completed, calling for a balanced system of highways and mass transit.
- 3** In 1958, the Detroit Rapid Transit Commission published a new plan which called for a regional monorail system.
- 4** In 1969, the comprehensive Detroit Regional Transportation and Land Use Study (TALUS) recommended rail rapid transit in eight metro corridors.
- 5** In 1975, SEMCOG adopted its *1990 Long-Range Transportation Plan*, which called for substantial improvements in public transit.
- 6** In 1979, SEMTA approved a detailed regional transit plan which included the development of rail lines and a comprehensive bus system.
- 7** In 1984, SEMTA approved the *Regional Public Transportation Consensus Plan*, a refined version of the 1979 plan.
- 8** In 1988, plans released by SEMCOG and the Metropolitan Transit Development Committee each called for substantial transit improvements.
- 9** In 1997, the Metropolitan Affairs Coalition and the Detroit Regional Chamber published a plan envisioning a three-tiered system of rapid transit, expanded fixed-route bus service, and flexible local service.

# Michigan: A Framework for Action

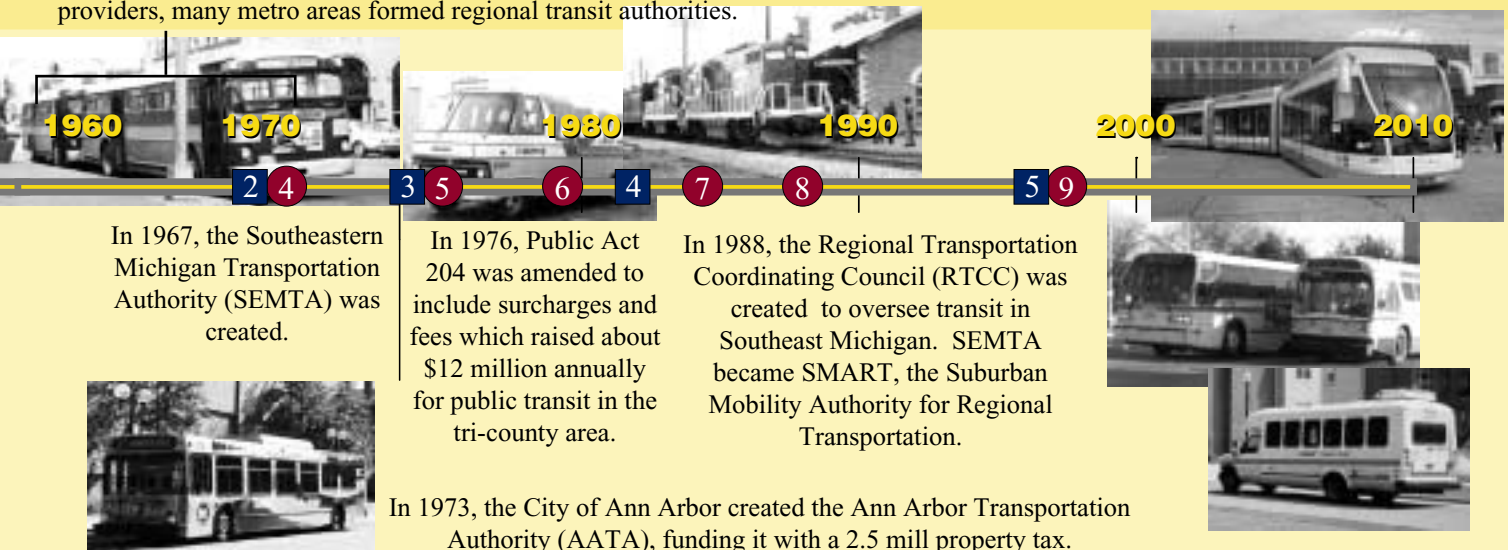
***We need to create a plan that can be implemented.*** To accomplish this, there must be true regional consensus on the service.

Taken together, this plan will:

- Provide a more efficient transportation system.
- Complement the road system.
- Help reduce traffic congestion, fuel consumption, and air pollution.
- Improve our region's economic competitiveness.
- Be cost prudent.
- Deliver the greatest good to the greatest number of people.

## in Southeast Michigan

In the 1960s, spurred by passage of the Urban Mass Transportation Act and by bankruptcies of private transit providers, many metro areas formed regional transit authorities.



### Missed opportunities for enhancing transit in Southeast Michigan

- 1 In the 1930s, public-works projects were comparatively inexpensive to build. Therefore, most large U.S. cities chose to develop major rail transit systems during this time. Detroit, however, began to abandon its rail service in favor of bus service.
- 2 Unlike regional transportation authorities in other metro areas, SEMTA was created without a corresponding dedicated local tax to support public transit, limiting the region's ability to compete for federal funds and to operate service.
- 3 In 1974, Southeast Michigan received a \$600 million commitment for mass transit from the Ford administration. A portion of this money helped fund the People Mover, but the majority of funds were lost because Detroit and the suburbs could not reach an agreement on how to spend them.
- 4 In 1982, Public Act 204's transit funding provisions (license-plate fee) expired because SEMTA and the Detroit Department of Transportation could not reach a merger agreement.
- 5 In 1997, Michigan's gas-tax was increased, but no additional funds were allocated to transit.

Note: Timeline images from *When Eastern Michigan Rode the Rails, Book 2*, 1986, used with permission of Jack Schramm.



# Key messages in the plan

- **Autos aren't bad, but over-dependence on them is.** People need to have a choice. We must provide service for users who do not own or have access to motor vehicles as well as an option for riders who do have a choice.
- **Needs driven.** The plan meets our goal of moving people and goods efficiently in our region. We believe that needs of the corridor should drive the mode in that corridor.
- **Cost effective.** The plan looks at immediate needs for improvement and what makes sense for Southeast Michigan's travel patterns. We must provide service that our citizens are willing to pay for, not necessarily what works for other parts of the country.

## Summary of recommendations

### Three-tiered service

Based on analysis of needs, SEMCOG suggests a three-tiered service for Southeast Michigan:

- **Rapid transit** (light rail or SpeedLink bus rapid transit . . . see box at right)
- **Fixed-route bus service**
- **Community transit** (flexible, neighborhood small-bus service)
- **High-use corridors need rapid transit.** Rapid transit is recommended on 12 regional corridors covering 259 miles and needing about 265 stations (red lines on map). Proposed corridors for this service are 8 Mile, Big Beaver/MetroParkway, Fort, Grand River, Gratiot, Greenfield, Jefferson, M-59, Michigan, Telegraph, Van Dyke, and Woodward. The appropriate form of rapid transit will result from detailed analysis by corridor. Our preliminary analysis of concentrations of people, jobs, and activity centers (green areas on map) suggests that SpeedLink would be most cost effective. For the cost of a couple of rail lines, we would be able to implement an entire SpeedLink network. Use of SpeedLink in the short term does not preclude light rail on corridors in the future, should ridership warrant.
- **Upgrade existing bus service.** The bus routes our providers currently operate are not bad. The problem is the frequency and hours of service on those routes. Using national guidelines for rating service frequency and duration on fixed routes, only 33 percent of Southeast Michigan's bus routes would receive a C grade or better. Frequency, reliability, safety, and other factors need to be addressed. We need to improve the existing service to enhance regional mobility.

Already-existing bus routes will also be used to feed into the rapid-transit service.

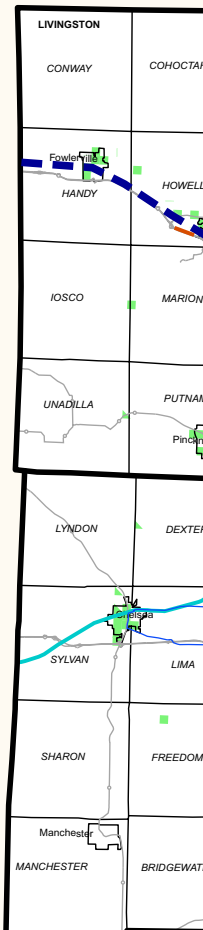
- **Expand existing community transit coverage; improve service.** Currently, a number of areas in the region, particularly in the more rural areas, do not provide this service.

### Other recommendations

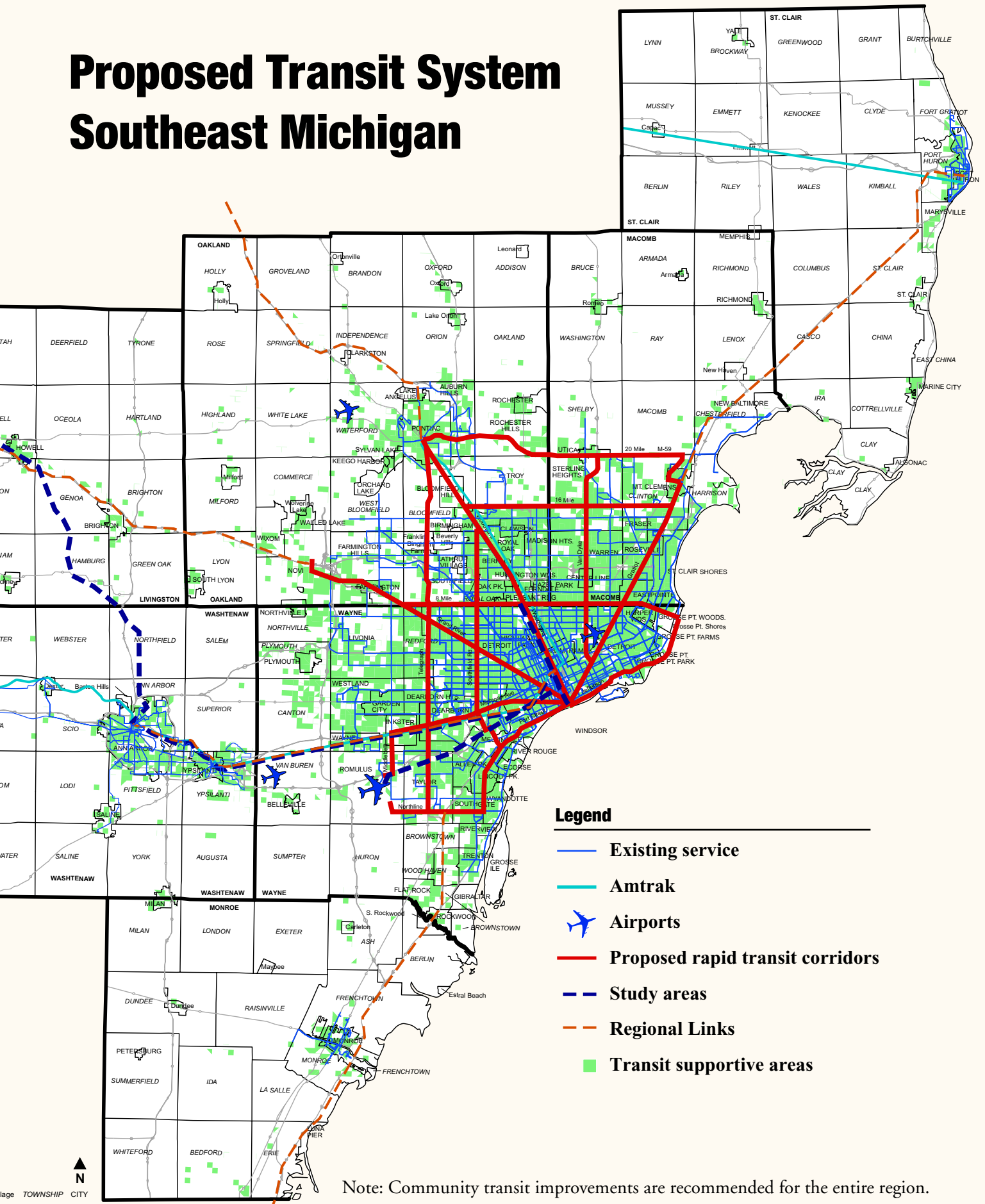
- **Regional links needed.** We need to address regional links (orange lines on map) from the tri-county urban area to the other urban areas of Ann Arbor, Port Huron, Howell, and Monroe. We are recommending that express bus service be considered for immediate use on all regional link corridors and are exploring the option of using passenger rail service as a commuter link between Ann Arbor and Metro Detroit.
- **Plan incorporates ongoing study results.** The plan recognizes that there are ongoing rapid transit studies (dark blue broken lines) on Woodward Avenue, Downtown Detroit to Metro Airport, and Detroit to Lansing. The results will be considered as the regional plan is refined.
- **Amenities impact people's decision to use transit.** The following amenities are recommended: safety and security; station features; physical accessibility; accessibility for people with special needs; easy-to-understand information; attractive vehicles; snow removal; and use of Intelligent Transportation System technology.

**What is SpeedLink?** SpeedLink is a rubber-tired form of rapid transit, initiated and researched by the Metropolitan Affairs Coalition, that would be quicker, easier, and less expensive to install than light rail while providing swift, reliable service and offering similar features:

- Use of dedicated lanes or "transit ways" (where needed to enhance vehicle flow).
- High-tech fare collection systems allowing payment prior to boarding.
- Traffic-signal preemption permitting vehicles to more easily flow through traffic signals and congested intersections.
- Vehicles or "coaches" with the comfort, amenities, and appearance of rail cars.
- Climate-controlled passenger stations with advanced information systems allowing riders to know when the next vehicle is arriving.
- An easy-to-understand system, using color-coded vehicles, stations, and routes.







# Proposed Transit System Southeast Michigan



# Some facts about Southeast Michigan

4,833,493	Population (2000 Census)
4,881,403	Population (May 2001, SEMCOG estimate)
1,698,819	Households (1990 Census)
1,889,226	Households (May 2001, SEMCOG estimate)
35 percent	Developed land

## 2030 — The future of Southeast Michigan

	+550,000 Population growth
	+390,000 New households
	+272,000 Acres developed (43 percent of all land will be developed)
	+445,000 New jobs

## 2030 — Region aging

591,000	More people over age 65
45,000	Fewer people under age 65
528,000	Over age 75

## Per capita spending: Local funds provided for transit

Southeast Michigan has a low level of service because a low level of funding is available for transit. Of 25 metropolitan areas in the country, the region ranks 23<sup>rd</sup> in both the number of miles and hours of transit service it provides. We rank fifth in population, but 21<sup>st</sup> in the amount of local dollars spent on transit. This low level of service is also why ridership is so low.

A recent survey of 25 major metropolitan areas shows that most spend over twice as much as Southeast Michigan, per capita, on their transit systems.

\$19	Detroit
\$47	St. Louis
\$82	Atlanta
\$88	Denver
\$90	Cleveland
\$140	San Francisco

“Tax hikes, like a regional sales tax, are tough sells. But SEMCOG’s survey suggests people are willing to take the lead. And when the people lead, politicians should follow.”

— Detroit Free Press  
Editorial,  
March 25, 2001

## Transit in Southeast Michigan

94%	Workers who travel to work by car, van, or light truck
2%	Workers who travel to work on public transit
192,000	Households in region who don’t own or have access to cars
53%	Detroit households (in empowerment zone) who don’t own or have access to cars
900	Number of large buses owned by DDOT (Detroit Department of Transportation) and SMART (Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation)
102,000	Daily miles traveled by DDOT and SMART buses
173,000	Average daily ridership on DDOT and SMART buses
15,500	Average daily ridership on AATA (Ann Arbor Transportation Authority) buses
3,100	Average daily ridership on BWATC (Blue Water Area Transportation Commission) buses
1,400	Average daily ridership on LET (Lake Erie Transit) buses

# Plan recommendations reflect public input

## Public forum results

### *What should a regional transit system do?*

- Provide regional mobility 24 hours a day, seven days a week, with rush-hour and non-rush-hour service.
- Be dependable, frequent, fast, safe, and secure, with reasonable rates.
- Serve the needs of many different groups . . . transit dependent as well as those who have a choice.
- Be easy-to-use, with understandable routes, schedules, transfers, and helpful customer service.

### *What are the benefits of regional transit?*

Contribute to the economic health of Southeast Michigan by:

- increasing regional marketability,
- increasing mobility for workers and customers,
- maximizing efficient land use,
- improving region's air and water quality,
- helping revitalize mature, urban areas.

### *What are the challenges to developing new transit options in Southeast Michigan?*

- finding more funding,
- upgrading transit's image among elected officials and the general public,
- improving regional governance.

### *What amenities are needed to complement a new transit system?*

- pick-up and drop-off facilities,
- security,
- information on routes and scheduling,
- fare collection,
- access to the system for drivers and pedestrians,
- vehicle design.

### *Do the proposed corridor alternatives connect the region?*

64% say yes.

### *Which is the preferred mode . . . rail in a few corridors, more express buses on the existing system, bus rapid transit in several corridors, or a mix of all modes?*

60% chose a mix of all modes.

## Mapping corridors: Some preliminary observations

- More than 50 primary corridor segments and 100 secondary corridor segments were identified.
- There is a need for traditional city-to-suburb transit corridors as well as suburb-to-suburb corridors.
- There should be increased access to regional shopping centers, areas of employment, and cultural activities.

## Telephone survey

1,400 households in the seven-county region participated in the January 2001 survey.

### *Survey results: Current system ranked low*

On a scale of 1-10, with 10 being very satisfied, the average rating of Southeast Michigan's current transportation system, **including transit**, is low at 4.19.

### *Survey results: Problems ranked*

1. Conditions of road surfaces.
2. Transportation for older people.
3. Transportation for disabled people.
4. Transportation for people without a dependable car.
5. Transportation for people who would prefer an alternative to driving.

### *Survey results: A new system*

- 42% "Very likely" to use a new public transit system that is clean, safe, and inexpensive, with frequent service to specific destinations.
- + 35% "Somewhat likely" to use a new transit system.
- = 77% Would likely use a new system.

### *Survey results: Funding*

- 59% Support additional funding for public transit (only 14% were opposed).
- 58% Of those at least somewhat likely to support additional funding for public transit, 58 percent prefer an increase to the sales tax.

**SEMCOG sought input on the transit plan in a variety of ways — from public meetings, household surveys, private sector partners, and transit operators.**

"Public opinion is finally shifting in the right direction and it is a demand from the people that would force our reluctant regional leaders to create and fund a transportation system that really works . . . By October of this year, we must agree on a regional transit plan and how it will be funded. If we don't, then forget about our future. The Motor City will be left behind in a cloud choking on its own exhaust fumes!"

— Chuck Stokes,  
WXYZ-TV Editorial,  
March 2001



“The sooner a consensus can be reached [on a new regional transit system], the sooner the region can achieve progress. Then, once a final consensus report is submitted to elected officials, supporters will need to lobby hard for a safe and reliable transit system.”

— Spinal Column Editorial, February 21-27, 2001

“I believe there’s an urgent need [for a mass-transit system], and it’s only going to get worse in the near future, in the entire Southeast Michigan area. With the urban sprawl from Detroit outward, what used to be quiet little farm country roads are now overly used, inadequate roads.”

— Joe Grajek, Mayor, New Baltimore

## Costs

- **SpeedLink rapid transit:** Capital costs are \$1.8 billion for the total network; operating costs are \$114 million annually.
- **Light rail cost comparison:** Capital costs are at least four times higher than for SpeedLink; operating and maintenance costs are double. Three-to-five more SpeedLink lines could be implemented for every light rail line.
- **Fixed-route bus improvements** (including enhancements to feed rapid transit system): Capital costs are \$127.7 million; annual operating costs are \$70.9 million.
- **Community transit improvements:** Capital costs are \$14.7 million; annual operating costs are \$11.9 million.
- **Total Costs:** Capital costs, over the 25 years it will take to fully implement the system described here, are approximately \$2 billion, and it will require an additional \$200 million to operate.

## Challenges

**Funding** — As noted above, implementing *any* new service, major or not, needs additional capital and operating funds. While our senators and congressional representatives are eager to bring federal capital dollars to the region (for purchasing equipment and building facilities), receipt of these dollars is dependent upon us having adequate local funds for match and ongoing operations. *Currently, we don’t.* On the operating side, operating funds (staff salaries, fuel, maintenance, supplies, administrative costs) are the funds that we, as a region, have to generate on our own. While the total costs will be spread out over 25 years, a significant increase in local transit funding will be necessary to make the system described here a reality. Taxing mechanisms currently being considered are income tax, payroll tax, excise tax on services, sales tax, property tax, gas tax, and vehicle registration tax. Any new tax for transit would require state-enabling legislation and a vote of the people.

**Governance** — There needs to be a regional decision on an entity to govern this new transit system. This entity could be one of the existing transit operators or an entirely new organization.

A coalition of the Detroit Regional Chamber and local and state government leaders are shaping a proposal for a new governance entity.

## Moving forward

**July 25** — Draft plan introduced to SEMCOG’s Transportation Advisory Council (TAC), the media, and the general public.

**August and September** — Public meetings in all seven counties and Detroit; schedule as follows:

**City of Detroit:** Monday, August 13, 7-8:30 p.m.; Cobo Conference Center, Room M-230.

**Livingston County:** Thursday, August 30, 7-8:30 p.m.; Livingston Education Service Agency, 1425 W. Grand River, Howell 48843-1916; 517-546-5550.

**Macomb County:** Wednesday, August 15, 4:30- 6 p.m.; Macomb Intermediate School District, 44001 Garfield Rd., Clinton Township 48038-1100; 810-228-3300.

**Monroe County:** Wednesday, August 29, 7-8:30 p.m.; Monroe Community College, 1555 S. Raisinville Rd., Monroe 48161-9746; 734-242-7300.

**Oakland County:** Monday, August 20, 4:30-6 p.m.; Oakland Intermediate School District, 2100 Pontiac Lake Rd., Waterford 48328-2735; 248-209-2000.

**St. Clair County:** Tuesday, August 28, 7-8:30 p.m.; St. Clair County Building, 201 McMorran Blvd., Port Huron 48060.

**Washtenaw County:** Wednesday, August 29, 4:30-6 p.m.; Washtenaw Intermediate School District, 1819 S. Wagner, Ann Arbor 48106-1406; 734-994-8100.

**Wayne County:** Monday, August 13, 4:30-6 p.m.; Wayne Regional Educational Service Agency, 33500 Van Born Rd., Wayne 48184-0807; 734-334-1300.

**September 26** — TAC votes to recommend plan adoption to SEMCOG’s Executive Committee.

**September 28** — Executive Committee votes to recommend plan adoption to SEMCOG’s General Assembly.

**October 25** — General Assembly votes to adopt plan.

**November** — Begin implementation.

## Your comments are important

SEMCOG comment line: 800-961-3334

SEMCOG fax: 313-961-4869

SEMCOG e-mail: [transit@semcog.org](mailto:transit@semcog.org)

For a copy of the plan document, contact SEMCOG Information Services, 313-961-4266. It is also available in PDF on SEMCOG’s Web site: [www.semcog.org](http://www.semcog.org).



# **Addendum to Transit Summary**

## **Page 2-3 — A brief history of transit in Southeast Michigan**

**Additions to timeline.** In 1900, inter-urban passenger rail service provided connections between numerous communities in and around the region including Ann Arbor, Detroit, Flint, Jackson, Monroe, Port Huron, and Toledo.

In 1977, both Blue Water Area Transit (BWAT) and Livingston Essential Transportation Services (LETS) were created.

In 1980, the City of Monroe and Frenchtown Township created Lake Erie Transit (LET), funding it with a 1/3 mill property tax.

## **Page 4 — Summary of recommendations**

**Three-tiered service becomes four-tiered service.** Regional links (listed under "Other recommendations") becomes the fourth tier in reviewing the priority role that they play in the overall transit system. An additional regional link between the cities of Ann Arbor and Brighton will also be added. [Note that the labeling of the tiers 1-4 does not imply priority among tiers of service. All four tiers are critical components of a regional transit system.]

## **Page 4 — Other recommendations**

**Plan incorporated ongoing study results.** Another study — the Detroit Downtown Transportation Vision — is added.

## **Page 8 — Costs**

**Fixed-route bus improvements' costs increase.** Capital costs are \$168.2 million; annual operating costs are \$71.6 million.

**Community transit improvements' costs increase.** Capital costs are \$30.4 million; annual operating costs are \$13.5 million.

**Total Costs clarified:** Costs quoted here are *in addition to* capital and operating costs needed for the existing system.

