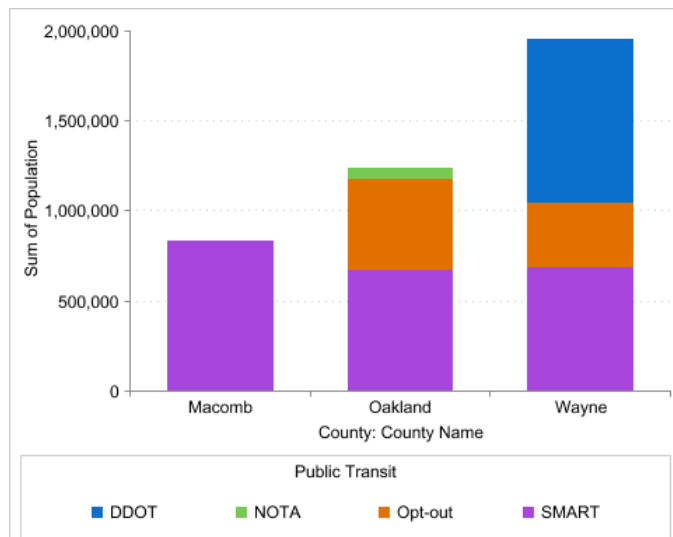


Making the case for a county-wide mass transit ballot initiative

It is no surprise to one living in the Detroit Urban Area (DUA) that we are seriously lacking adequate public transportation services. The DUA ranks ninth in population in the United States but 25th in terms of public transportation passenger trips.¹

Functioning Elements

The various elements of public transit available within the DUA actually function rather nicely; especially given the funding available. Collectively however we have a rather dysfunctional system. To date, the DUA has no light or heavy rail commuter system.² For our discussion purposes the term public or mass transportation will refer to motor buses and dial-a-ride services only. The DUA is made up of three counties; Macomb, Oakland and Wayne. There are four public transit systems to consider in the DUA; DDOT, SMART, NOTA, and Opt-out.



The Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT) services the City of Detroit. The Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation (SMART) services many, but not all, of the communities within the counties of Macomb, Oakland, and Wayne. SMART buses also travel within the City of Detroit.³ The North Oakland Transit Authority (NOTA) is a small dial-a-ride system servicing three villages and three townships in northern Oakland County. The fourth option is called opt-out; meaning the community has chosen not to participate in a regional transit system (some communities may offer their own dial-a-ride system).

Opt-out

The county in which I live, Oakland, has a system where each community decides whether it wants to be included in the SMART bus system—thus the use of the term Opt-out. There are approximately 60 communities in Oakland County; each with their own government. To date, about 23 of these communities have chosen to be part of the public transportation system (in terms of population however this represents about 55% of Oakland County serviced by SMART). As you can imagine this leads to a very confusing and “patchwork quilt” image of bus

¹ American Public Transportation Association, *2009 Public Transportation Fact Book*, Washington, D.C., April, 2009.

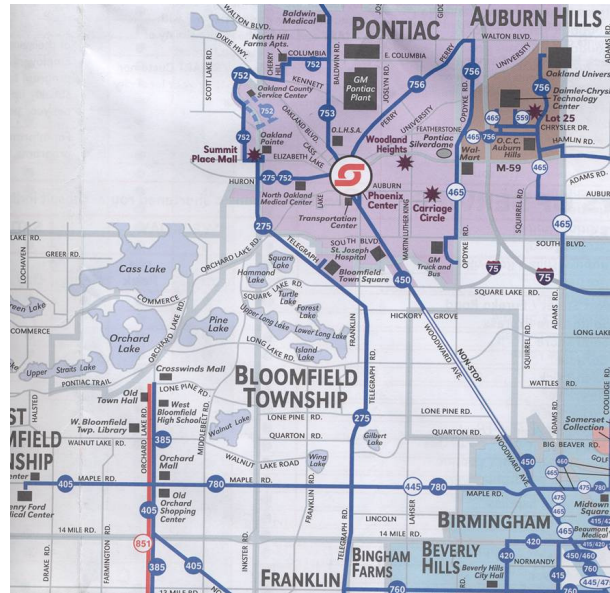
² Downtown Detroit does have an elevated people mover but it travels in a relatively small circle serving the immediate downtown only.

³ Although SMART can drop passengers off in Detroit its permission to pick up passengers within the City of Detroit has significant limitations. This has caused aggravation for passengers standing at Detroit bus stops and watching the SMART bus pass by without stopping.

service. The current system is pitting communities against each other and causing a serious disruption of services.

Gaps in Service

Let me give you some examples of gaps in service. Bloomfield Township is an opt-in community. Lying within the township however is the City of Bloomfield Hills. The city is an opt-out community. Unfortunately one of the most travelled routes to Detroit, Woodward Avenue, passes through these two communities. SMART's Woodward bus from the City of Pontiac to Detroit services Bloomfield Township but must fly right through Bloomfield Hills without stopping. Once the bus passes through Bloomfield Hills it hits the City of Birmingham, an opt-in community, and begins service again. The result is an unfortunate situation of individuals leaving the bus in Bloomfield Township and walking along Woodward Avenue, without sidewalks, to get to jobs in Bloomfield Hills.⁴



A contrasting example involves the city in which I live, Keego Harbor. Surrounding me is the Charter Township of West Bloomfield (population 64,000) an opt-in community and therefore serviced by SMART buses. Lying within West Bloomfield Township are three cities with a total population of less than 7,000 people (Keego Harbor, Orchard Lake, and Sylvan Lake), each of which are opt-out communities. Unfortunately these communities lie along an historic trade route from Lake Huron through Ann Arbor to Chicago (known locally as Pontiac Trail after the famous American Indian Chief Pontiac). This four-mile gap in service keeps SMART from linking the three most travelled north-south bus routes in Oakland County specifically Orchard Lake Road, Telegraph Road, and Woodward Avenue.

A more troubling example is what has occurred with our Detroit Metropolitan Airport. The City of Livonia, lying between the airport and Oakland County, chose to opt-out of public transportation services. The residents of Oakland County then lost its SMART bus service to the airport.

Why would a community opt-out?

I often hear community leaders explain their decision to opt-out is based on the belief that their residents do not want to ride the bus. In some cases this decision is made without polling the community's residents. In many cases this perception is based on the use of fixed route passenger trips only without considering the curb-to-curb minibus service also provided through SMART. It is amazing to me the number of seniors and disabled residents in opt-in communities

⁴ Bloomfield Hills looks into rejoining SMART bus system , *C and G News*, October 22, 2008, <http://www.candgnews.com/Homepage-Articles/2008/10-22-08/BG-SMART.asp>, Accessed September, 8, 2009.

who are unaware of this highly successful minibus program. I can only imagine how many seniors and disabled residents of opt-out communities would demand public transportation in their community if they knew this service was included.

A second concern is that dollars raised in one community will be used to benefit another. Due to Federal grants, State grants and other revenue sources, every dollar raised through local SMART contributions in Oakland County has returned over two dollars in the cost of services provided back to Oakland County.⁵ Many of the taxes a resident pays go into general funds where it is difficult to see the benefits. Through bus stops added, fixed routes added and the curb-to-curb minibus services, the SMART millage is one example where a resident can see a direct result of their taxes paid.

Finally, there are residents who are against any taxes regardless of the use. I can understand their position given the current economic times. I would point out however that with public transportation an individual can experience a reduction in other expenses by utilizing the bus service provided by the SMART millage. I believe the days are gone where the U.S. economy can support one car for every family member. Where 70% of current SMART users ride the bus to get to work⁶ and 20% use the bus to get to an educational institution⁷, a small investment in public transit can significantly improve a family's ability to balance resources among all family members.

Reasons for a county-wide ballot

In August of 2010 the SMART property tax renewal will appear on ballots. Currently, the only citizens to see the initiative in Oakland County will be those citizens in the 23 opt-in communities. Proponents of a regional public transportation system have two options to expand this opportunity. The first option is to lobby each community to have the initiative placed on the ballot and the second option is to lobby for a county-wide ballot initiative.

Adding the initiative to individual communities is problematic and does not solve the overall problem. The governing structure in these Oakland County communities is a collection of Townships, Cities and Villages. The process for adding a millage initiative to these communities varies considerably based on their charters. More importantly however, this option does not solve the disruption and gaps in service caused by communities that choose to opt-out. How can one community decide to opt-in if they fear their neighboring community will opt-out? Only a county-wide initiative will solve this problem.

Secondly, there are many stakeholders in a community besides the residents themselves that benefit from public transportation. Residents dependent on domestic help or businesses dependent on employees' timely arrival are directly impacted by the availability of public transportation.

Finally, there are public institutions located in communities that have opted out. The Cranbrook Institute of Science schedules excellent programming for students. It would be convenient for

⁵ SMART Update for the Oakland County Public Transit Authority, March 18, 2009, p. 8.

⁶ SMART Update for the Oakland County Public Transit Authority, March 18, 2009, p. 5.

⁷ SMART 2008 Annual Report, p. 6.

students to take a bus to these events. Cranbrook is located in the City of Bloomfield Hills, an opt-out community. The West Bloomfield School District is fortunate that both middle schools and the high school are located along Orchard Lake Road. This provides a perfect opportunity for students to use the existing SMART bus fixed bus routes to reach these schools outside of the normal school bus schedule. However, the Abbott Middle School is located in the City of Orchard Lake Village, an opt-out community.

In Conclusion

The State of Michigan is struggling with the problem that over 50% of its college graduates are leaving the State—this was before the recent economic downturn.⁸ Student surveys reveal that lifestyle is the leading cause of this exodus from the state. Included in lifestyle is an interest in a public transportation system that eliminates the need for a car. Michigan has a long way to go to achieve this level of service but it cannot begin to address these issues without a regional system. We cannot achieve a regional system when one of the region's largest and most affluent counties does not support a county-wide system itself.

I am in support of a county-wide ballot initiative and urge our Oakland County Board of Commissioners to approve this legislation.

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⁸ Half of University Grads Flee Michigan, Presidents Council State Universities of Michigan, <http://www.pcsun.org/currentnews/mid/374/newsid374/27/>, Accessed September 9, 2009.