



Transportation Riders United

500 Griswold Suite 1650 Detroit, MI 48226

(313) 963-8872 Fax (313) 963-8876

“Moving Us Forward”

www.DetroitTransit.org

TRUmember@DetroitTransit.org

Comments on SEMCOG’s 2035 Regional Transportation Plan

October 20, 2009

Transportation Riders United, Inc. (TRU) wants to commend SEMCOG on the adoption of forward looking goals and new rapid transit projects in the 2035 Regional Transportation Plan (RTP). The new prominence given to regional improvement goals such as “encouraging land use and housing decisions that foster meaningful transportation choices,” promoting “environmental health, community revitalization and stability, and quality of life,...prioritizing highway maintenance before highway expansion,” and “increasing public involvement and ensur[ing] equal access to participation in transportation decision making” represent significant advances forward in regional visioning compared to earlier RTPs. Southeast Michigan leadership has come a long way in a short time—in part spurred by dramatic changes in economic conditions—in recognizing how essential developing a truly multi-modal transportation system and rebuilding thriving communities are to the region’s future prosperity.

For the first time, the RTP contains specific, realizable rapid transit projects, including the Ann Arbor to Detroit Commuter rail project, the Woodward Avenue Light Rail project and the Washtenaw-Livingston County commuter rail project, as well as alternatives analyses for additional transit system routes along M-59, Gratiot Avenue, and expansion of the Woodward Avenue line in Oakland County, which are specified in the Regional Transportation Coordinating Council’s (RTCC’s) Comprehensive Regional Transit Service Plan completed in 2008. These are important projects that will help transition Southeast Michigan to a more vibrant and sustainable region and help attract desperately needed economic growth.

However, while SEMCOG’s 2035 RTP provides a positive change of direction in stated goals and objectives from earlier plans, we find that the distribution of expenditures for the more than 1,800 projects listed in the plan is inconsistent with the stated change in direction; rather, the expenditure plan serves to uphold older transportation priorities, and does not demonstrate significant actual reform in transportation investment prioritization.

Most of expenditures in the 2035 RTP are allocated to maintaining and operating our existing transportation system, be that repairing bridges and pavement on existing roads, plowing snow, cutting grass on right of ways, operating existing transit systems and replacing buses—i.e., to repair and maintain the current transportation system. There does appear to be about \$11 billion out of the total \$69 billion in the RTP for discretionary projects. These new projects will most influence the future of the region. It appears that SEMCOG has targeted most of these discretionary investment dollars in the RTP to building new highway capacity—close to \$10 billion in road and bridge expansions—while less than \$0.8 billion is directed to new transit capacity. This split for discretionary projects is wrong for Southeast Michigan.

Greater Detroit’s road network is complete and comprehensive, while its transit network is severely underdeveloped with large gaps that need to be filled. At this point, new roadway expansion projects in Southeast Michigan serve to only further expand sprawl on the fringes of a region that is experiencing economic decline and where many of its established communities fight to maintain viability. The 2008 report of the Michigan Transportation Funding Task Force

finds that transit investment in Michigan is half to one-tenth the investment made by other populated, economically diverse states like New York, New Jersey, Maryland, Illinois, Massachusetts, California, even Minnesota and Delaware.

Competing regions are spending 50 percent or more on transit in their 2035 plans. Public dollars spent on roadway expansion projects in Southeast Michigan will continue to degrade the viability of the region, while significant investment in transit enhancement projects offers the potential to increase its prospects for attracting and facilitating new growth. Every mile of new pavement is an obligation to future maintenance costs, while the region currently struggles to maintain what is already built.

Projects in the 2035 Plan should meet an urgent need and support a vision for a prosperous and vibrant future for the region. However, it appears that most of the discretionary projects listed in the RTP are better suited to the 1950s, or to the past days of cheap gas supplied by wells located in the United States along with the enormous regional prosperity based on a rapidly growing U.S auto industry. The Plan's road expansion projects are targeted to support further expansion of the outer suburbs while further draining vitality away from our established communities in a low-growth or negative-growth region. They will continue to push the region in the opposite direction of the Plans stated goal of "stabilizing communities and neighborhoods by promoting livability and sensible development/ redevelopment." These projects also run contrary to the pressing need to reduce energy consumption, particularly our dependence on oil imports, as well as reduce production of pollution, including CO₂.

Transportation Riders United's research shows that roadway expansion projects will continue to degrade the viability of the region, while transit enhancement projects show the potential to increase the viability and the sustainability of the region.

We question how the discretionary projects in the RTP were vetted to ensure suitability for realistic regional economic and population projections and to serve to improve the viability of the region. As an example, we question the continued inclusion of the I-375 extension project (TRP 2591). This project was originally considered to feed three casinos along the riverfront and act as the driveway to the General Motors parking lots serving the Renaissance Center. Now the casinos have gone elsewhere and General Motors is only a shadow of what it was before entering bankruptcy. There is no basis for keeping this project on the books to the tune of \$204 million. A \$200 million transit project would produce more high-paying construction and operating jobs, likely not be dependent on oil imports to the same degree as this roadway project, and likely spur more economic growth.

Other large (projects above \$100 million) wasteful projects that do not meet our future needs as a region include:

Project ID	Project Description	Estimated Cost
RTP 935	I-94 expansion from I-96 to Conner	\$3,500,000,000
RTP 4429	Detroit River International Crossing bridge	\$1,860,000,000
RTP 2514	I-75 expansion, 8 mi to M59	\$1,210,000,000
RTP 4417	Ambassador Bridge Enhancement	\$670,000,000
RTP 4037	I-75 @M-59 interchange	\$387,000,000
RTP 2530	Blue Water Bridge Plaza	\$348,000,000
RTP 2591	I-375 extension (discussed above)	\$204,000,000
RTP 932	Widen M-59 between I-96 and Old US 23	\$156,000,000
RTP 4299	Widen US-23	\$152,000,000
RTP 2587	Widen M59 between Crooks and Ryan	\$148,000,000
RTP 4426	New Latson interchange on I-96	\$100,000,000
	Total	\$8,735,000,000

We ask SEMCOG to remove the above projects from the RTP.

In addition to these projects, there are many listed road expansion projects that cost less than \$100 million. These road widening projects in a shrinking region with a built-out road network are also wasteful and not appropriate for a vibrant and sustainable future for the region. We ask SEMCOG to remove these smaller listed road expansion projects from the RTP, or show justification that taxpayer money spent on a road expansion project truly enhances the performance of the entire region, and not just serves a pocket of growth around the expansion.

As an example, other projects in the plan are in place to provide for a high-capacity road extension of the M-5 Haggerty Connector north of Pontiac Trail. Project RTP 6169 for a high-capacity roundabout at the M-5 and Pontiac Trail intersection, the high capacity roundabout at the Martin Road-Oakley Park Road intersection and Project RTP 4368 expansion of Martin Road from 2 to 5 lanes all are to support a local project to extend M-5 to Martin Road and Union Lake Road. While the sum of these 2 RTP projects is less than \$10 million, they are still wasteful and they are contrary to the agreement not to extend a high capacity M-5 type road north of Pontiac Trail. We ask SEMCOG to remove these projects from the RTP.

The SEMCOG 2035 RTP states that there is not enough money to adequately manage our current highway and bridge program while at the same time; it includes these unnecessary road expansion projects. Based on the discretionary expansion projects that are listed in the "fiscally constrained" plan, SEMCOG has not demonstrated a need to increase funding for roads.

There would be more than enough money to complete the projects in the entire RTCC regional transit plan if expenditures allocated to road expansion projects were flexed to the RTCC transit plan. Further Michigan continues to be a donor state in the federal transit budget. As Southeast Michigan's Metropolitan Planning Organization, SEMCOG needs to maximize the amount of federal and state transportation money invested in transit and other non-road based surface transportation projects.

Transit investments will achieve congestion mitigation and safety goals. Recent studies show that the most effective way to build out of congestion is not through widening roads that

encourage drivers to drive more, filling the new lane with new traffic within 5 years, but to build transit. Certainly riding a bus or a light rail train is about 10 times safer per mile than driving a car. Congestion mitigation and safety budgets should be used to flex money to transit projects.

Transportation Riders United does agree with SEMCOG that the current levels for funding transit is woefully inadequate to support needed improvements that will build a vibrant and sustainable future for the region. We applaud SEMCOG's effort to actively seek additional funds for transit and we are pleased to work with SEMCOG on this effort.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide SEMCOG with these comments.

Transportation Riders United, Inc.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Lawrence M. Hands". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Lawrence M. Hands, PE
Treasurer

ABOUT TRANSPORTATION RIDERS UNITED (TRU)

The mission of Transportation Riders United (TRU) is to improve and promote transit in greater Detroit in order to restore urban vitality, ensure transportation equity and improve quality of life. TRU believes the Detroit region needs a balanced transportation network because transportation investments shape our future. TRU was incorporated in 2001 as a 501(c)(3) non-profit charitable organization.