



## **TRU Comments to the RTA Regarding the proposed Regional Transit Master Plan**

**Submitted June 28, 2016**

**TRU strongly supports the Regional Transit Authority's proposed Regional Transit Master Plan.** Once fully implemented, this plan will take major steps towards the high-quality regional transit system our region needs. Given the current struggles of people throughout our region and the enormous benefits that effective transit can provide, this proposal to double our region's investment in public transit is wholeheartedly welcomed (and long overdue).

### **Plan Strengths**

Aspects of the plan we especially find valuable include the following:

1. Once implemented, this plan will make it easier to quickly and reliably travel across the region through new investments in Bus Rapid Transit, Regional Rail, and Cross County Connectors. Our region very much needs these types of **frequent rapid transit** services that will operate when people need them.
2. This plan will enable people to access more jobs and opportunities by finally **providing transit in areas that are currently underserved or completely lacking transit**. This will help people seeking jobs and employers seeking reliable workers, thus helping our entire region.
3. **Airport Express is extremely necessary** for both passengers and airport workers to be able to arrive and depart from the airport in an inexpensive and timely manner. This service will also make our region more attractive to tourists, conventions, and potential investors.
4. This plan also provides **great connections between communities**. Transit connections linking Washtenaw and Wayne Counties are long overdue. We also applaud improved transit both on radials that connect Detroit with suburban communities and also on suburb-to-suburb routes like Greenfield that will seamlessly connect the vibrant communities of Dearborn, northwest Detroit, Southfield and Birmingham.

## **Top Priority Recommendations for Plan Improvement**

While TRU supports this plan, the transit needs of this region are greater than this plan proposes to provide. Thousands of people are struggling or failing to reach their daily needs and while this plan is a critically important step forward, it is not bold enough to address our region's needs. To quickly provide sufficient transit service to people all throughout the region, we believe the plan should be strengthened in several vital ways:

**Recommendation 1) Transit improvements must begin right away.** These are vital connections that the regional cannot afford to wait so long to see implemented. In particular, Airport Express Service needs to start sooner than 2021-22. If new Airport Express service can begin for some counties in 2017, it should begin for all counties by 2018.

**R2) This plan needs greater investment in services for seniors and people with disabilities.** This population has been sorely underserved for far too long and has huge need for more and better transit, especially as the population grows. The plan needs greater clarity on how these transit services will be provided, as the current plan is still quite vague as to how these various services will be provided, by whom and with what levels of investment.

**R3) To the extent that cost is a primary barrier to providing more transit service more quickly throughout the region, the millage rate should be increased to 1.5 mil.** This is a modest increase in per household cost that polls show voters are willing to support that would enable substantially greater transit service throughout our region.

## **Additional Recommendations: More Transit Service Needed**

While the plan provides much important new transit service, there are several important routes or services that the plan neglects or invests in insufficiently. This plan and our region would be greatly improved with additional transit services, as follows:

**R4) Regional Rail should be supplemented** with an express bus route to provide more frequent service at least 18 hours each day (even if it operates slower). This service must begin right away, as the gap between Detroit and Ann Arbor is one of the most important gaps in the region's transit service.

**R5) The plan should add a direct transit connection between Washtenaw and Oakland Counties,** at least as a bi-directional Commuter Express route. The number of people who live in one county and work in the other should justify a direct connection, perhaps connecting Ann Arbor with Farmington, Southfield, and Troy. This would also help improve the perception that Washtenaw and western Oakland Counties are not receiving sufficient benefit from this plan.

**R6) The RTA should analyze possible future routes for more BRT and regional rail**, such as on Grand River BRT, Detroit-Royal Oak-Troy-Pontiac regional rail, and an extension of rail into Chelsea. While they may not be feasible within the first five years of the plan, they could certainly be done within the plan's 20 year time horizon.

**R7) Given the vitality and density of downtown Plymouth, the plan should extend the Plymouth Route into downtown Plymouth**, not stop just a few miles short.

## **Additional Recommendations**

The plan could be additionally improved by implementing these recommendations:

**R8) The plan should make clear that all transit stops should be accessible to all providers and all modes of transit**, wherever it is feasible to do so. Where there is a substantial reason why stops cannot be shared by all modes and providers, there must be clear easy access between modes.

**R9) In order to maintain a commitment to keep rapid transit rapid, Woodward BRT service must have dedicated lanes and signal priority throughout the route**, especially through midtown Detroit. Cass is not designed for rapid transit, nor should it be, while Woodward can and should be.

**R10) The RTA should work with MDOT to enable bus-on-shoulder** on I-75, I-275 and other highway routes, to ensure routes along the highways can effectively compete with driving travel time. Other metro regions like Chicago have permitted buses that travel on highways to drive on the shoulder when average speed drops below a set level, like 30 mph, to increase their reliability and travel time.

**R11) The plan should offer additional transfer opportunities between the regional rail service and the Michigan Avenue BRT**, both in southwest Detroit and potentially north of the airport.

**R12) The plan should also consider future growth**, both of the transit system and of regional infill development, and how the plan will adjust to both. Many BRT routes quickly become overcrowded and the RTA must be prepared to address high demand.

**R13) The RTA should commit to maximize the environmental cleanliness** of its operations, utilizing hybrid vehicles and implementing anti-idling policies wherever feasible.

## **Questions Still Unanswered**

While we strongly support what it is the plan, this plan is more a broad overview of goals and direction. Several questions remain that need to be addressed right away.

**Q1) The RTA's operational model is still unclear, especially who will be providing which services.** Will the RTA hire staff and purchase vehicles to operate transit service itself? What services will the region's current transit agencies be contracted to provide? Will any of the Master Plan's transit services be outsourced to private companies, and if so, under what conditions? These are important concepts for people to understand, especially transit riders, so they can understand the purpose and role of the RTA in transit operations.

TRU recommends using public agency staff over contractors whenever feasible, whether those be RTA or transit agency staff. This builds capacity and expertise and provides for longer term

Additionally, for services not directly operated by RTA, will some or all of the region's transit be co-branded as RTA so the RTA has a well-known public role? Or will the RTA primarily work behind the scenes to oversee and manage, without a major visible role?

**Q2) How will current agencies' services be impacted by this plan?** How will their service change when the RTA plan is implemented? Current riders want to know if any of the services they depend on will be altered. Given the Master Plan premise that the current service is its foundation, what actions will the RTA take to improve both current transit service funding and delivery?

**Q3) Will Cross County Connectors replace or supplement current local bus service?** If they replace current service, they cannot be limited stop service without eliminating the current bus stops people are relying on. RTA should explore the feasibility of supplement current service so these routes have both services that stop at every stop and additional express / limited stop service.

**Q4) How will Park & Ride lots be incorporated into the plan?** Given the sprawl and auto dependency of much of the region, effective use of Park & Ride will be critical to regional transit success. Can proposed or likely Park & Ride lots be marked on the map?

In closing, this plan is a huge improvement for our region. **While we believe a greater investment could enable more transit improvements to be delivered more swiftly, TRU strongly supports this plan.** We thank the RTA staff, board, consultants and advisors for their hard work to bring about this important plan.

We look forward to working to ensure the RTA has the funding to implement it and will work with RTA throughout the years to come to ensure that implementation provides the greatest benefits possible to the people of southeast Michigan.