



To: SMART

?: Dwight Ferrell, General Manager

From: Transportation Riders United

Dated: May 17, 2023

Re: Proposed service changes: two steps forward, one step back

Dear Mr. Ferrell,

We at Transportation Riders United are delighted to see that SMART is ready to deliver new bus service in Oakland County this year. Voters throughout the county demonstrated strong support for county-wide transit service, especially in communities like Novi, Rochester Hills, and Waterford, where truly reliable public transit has been absent for nearly 30 years.

We are proud to have played a significant role in educating voters on the value of public transit and in mobilizing voter turnout. Our work with both voters and elected leaders raised awareness of SMART and the important services you provide. Voters and transit riders expect that SMART will deliver on its mission to connect communities in Oakland County and throughout the region.

Overall, we're pleased with your plans for service expansion in 2023. The new and extended routes will provide transit-dependent people in former opt-out communities with unprecedented freedom of movement. We also have several suggestions and critiques of the planned changes to service which we wish to express, categorized as follows:

1. Service cuts and unreliability of Flex
2. Route configurations and infrastructure
3. Public engagement
4. Reliability

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Proposed Service Cuts

While we understand that SMART's current staffing troubles may require trade-offs in where service is allocated, it's disheartening to see the expansion we celebrate paired with significant service cuts. The total removal of Route 400, removal of weekend service on 760 and 796, and transition to peak-only 430 service appear to set a worrying precedent - that expansion in some communities means contraction in others. This trade-off, in the face of significantly increased investment in transit, is unacceptable. These cut routes serve areas, like Pontiac, Southfield, and Clawson, that have great potential for higher ridership if service was more frequent and reliable.

The proposed cuts should be temporary, not permanent - their low ridership is not necessarily evidence of naturally low demand, but more the result of very low service frequencies (60 minute headways) and unreliable service caused by SMART's ongoing shortage of bus operators.

It also struck us that all of the affected routes were covered totally or partly by Flex zones. Yet many transit riders report long and inconsistent wait times, or even the inability to book rides due to high demand or app failures. **Flex is not a sufficient substitute for scheduled services**, not given its high per-passenger costs, not with the unreliability of Flex to-date, and not in areas with moderately high density.

The proposed service cuts may increase Flex demand. While making Flex's budget bigger and deploying more vehicles might temporarily handle the increased demand, Flex should NOT lead to more fixed-route service being replaced in a costly, unreliable, and unsustainable fashion.

Route configurations and stop infrastructure

Overall, **the proposed extensions and two new routes are positive developments**. Some of our concerns and questions about them were

addressed at the previous public meetings hosted by SMART, but we would like to reiterate TRU's stance here.

Good decisions:

- If we're understanding the maps correctly, it appears Routes 790, 759, and 796 will all connect Oakland University and Phoenix Center on weekdays. This is great news for OU - an effective frequency of 30 minutes or better between destinations will help grow student ridership. We hope that 796 service is not eliminated on weekdays.
- We were informed that stops would be added on the portion of Walton Blvd shared by 759 and 796 - again, this is a positive step that will grow ridership.
- The changes to the configuration of 790 are positive and we hope the extension to Adams Rd forms the basis of a future Crooks route.
- All other route configurations are positive.

Questions/suggestions/concerns:

- The configuration of **492 should be modified to allow for direct transfers to FAST Woodward** at the southern end of the route. If it requires 3 buses to ride from Rochester to Detroit, very few people will want to take that trip. Possible solutions include continuing the route past the Royal Oak Transit Center to Woodward and 11 Mile, or to State Fair Transit Center - relatively small extensions that could eliminate a long walk or transfer.
- We are also concerned about safety and accessibility for users of new stops on the 450 and 462 in Bloomfield Hills. This stretch of Woodward lacks pedestrian facilities of any kind - no sidewalks, crosswalks, or pedestrian crossing signals. We strongly encourage SMART to work closely with MDOT and local municipal authorities to make these stops as safe as possible to use. If that is not possible in a timely fashion, it may be imperative to extend Flex coverage into Bloomfield Hills to prevent "Frogger" situations.

Public engagement

SMART seems to be providing mixed levels of public engagement. We are pleased by the openness shown by SMART staff at the public hearings so far and appreciate Deputy GM Gunter's willingness to talk with advocates.

Yet, despite good public hearings, we remain concerned about SMART's decision to discontinue the public's ability to provide comments at board meetings using Zoom. The region SMART serves was huge before 2022 and it has grown further. Remote participation allows people in distant corners of Oakland County and elsewhere in the region to make their voice heard to SMART's leadership. An agency of your size and budget should be able to figure out how to make Zoom or other video conferencing technology work. **Please don't silence riders** who lack the means to travel to mid-day meetings in person.

We again recommend SMART start hosting regular Customer Comment meetings or other such public engagement opportunities so riders and other stakeholders can have clear, regular communication with SMART staff, without undue burden on board member time.

Another recommendation - Given that SMART is going to operate service in communities whose elected officials openly question the need for fixed-route transit and where public transit is a new experience for most residents in the areas new SMART routes will serve, **SMART should put extra effort into educating residents** of Rochester, Novi, Wixom, Waterford, Auburn Hills, and other similar areas. One effective intervention could be establishing a 'rider training' program promoted in partnership with local institutions. People living in these communities receiving new service will be largely unfamiliar with how to ride SMART. TRU would be happy to collaborate with SMART in distributing educational resources and hosting events that teach users the basics of bus riding. We know that SMART is capable of holding educational 'ride-along' events, and what better opportunity to do so than at the launch of the new routes?

Reliability is essential

We remain very concerned about SMART's recent lack of reliability in transit service. SMART's long-established reputation of reliability is rapidly eroding, as dozens of runs are cut every day. **This is a crisis**, yet SMART fails to treat it with due urgency. Many TRU staff regularly personally experience no-show buses and regularly get complaints from other riders experiencing the same. Riders are being lost every day that you fail to resolve your staffing crisis, instead spending money they can't afford to buy cars they can't rely on, because they can't rely on SMART. **No more delays - boost wages for drivers to a truly competitive rate** and improve work rules immediately, so this crisis can quickly end and you can effectively expand without simultaneous cuts!

Work with us!

Lastly, we encourage you to work with us to improve and implement your plans for 2023 and beyond. Many TRU staff and volunteers are regular SMART riders and we're in frequent communication with many more of SMART's customers, so the suggestions and concerns we present come from bus riders' lived experience. Riders are excited to see these big changes, but we expect reliable, consistent bus service, and an agency that is responsive to their concerns.

Please remember, TRU supports SMART and the essential job you perform for southeast Michigan. We believe that communicating openly and regularly will enable better accomplishment of our shared goal - great transit throughout southeast Michigan.

Thank you again for all you do to provide essential mobility for the region.

Sincerely,

The TRU Team, including

Megan Owens, Executive Director

Joel Batterman, Community Engagement Manager

Thomas Yazbeck, Community Engagement Specialist