



Improving Public Transit in Wayne County: Recommendations for Near-Term Action

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Authored by Joel Batterman and Megan Owens

Summary: Wayne County is among the largest counties in the nation without countywide public transit service. While vital services are provided by DDOT in the City of Detroit and SMART in numerous inner-ring suburbs, some **350,000 residents live in communities that lack fixed-route transit.** This leaves tens of thousands of hard-working people unable to access good-paying jobs, seniors stranded when they retire from driving, and the county less able to compete for young professionals and the businesses seeking to hire them.

Wayne County must and can ensure countywide transit that leaves no one behind.

Transportation Riders United recommends two options for making that happen.

1) A Multi-County RTA ballot measure including all of Wayne County

A four-countywide ballot measure was narrowly defeated in 2016 despite 53% support in Wayne County. Macomb County has blocked further efforts to place an RTA measure on the ballot. New leadership in Lansing should be able to amend the RTA's enabling legislation to prevent Macomb from vetoing further action. Then **Wayne, Oakland, and Washtenaw Counties can place an RTA measure on their ballots in 2024** and campaign to pass it. This requires great collaboration and more steps but could provide substantially greater funding and regional connectivity.

2) A Countywide Wayne County millage vote

While Wayne County has traditionally left individual communities to join the Wayne County Public Transit Authority and pass millages to enable SMART funding, Wayne County can and should follow Macomb and Oakland Counties' leads and pass a countywide transit funding ballot measure. Just as **the County Commission can** vote to place other funding measures on the countywide ballot, they could vote to **place a countywide transit funding measure on the ballot**, replacing the WCPTA/SMART millage. The County would have much greater autonomy but would likely raise significantly less revenue and would near the County's millage cap.

TRU recommends that Wayne County leaders take steps towards both during the summer and fall of 2023 **and make a decision before the end of 2023** which to proceed with in 2024. Key legal actions aren't required until early 2024 to get either on the ballot in November of 2024.

Questions that must be considered include interest and commitment from other counties, what services Detroit would get (on top of continued DDOT service), how to ensure benefits throughout the whole county, what millage rate would provide what levels of transit service, and how to build an effective gov-biz-org coalition to make either measure successful at the ballot.

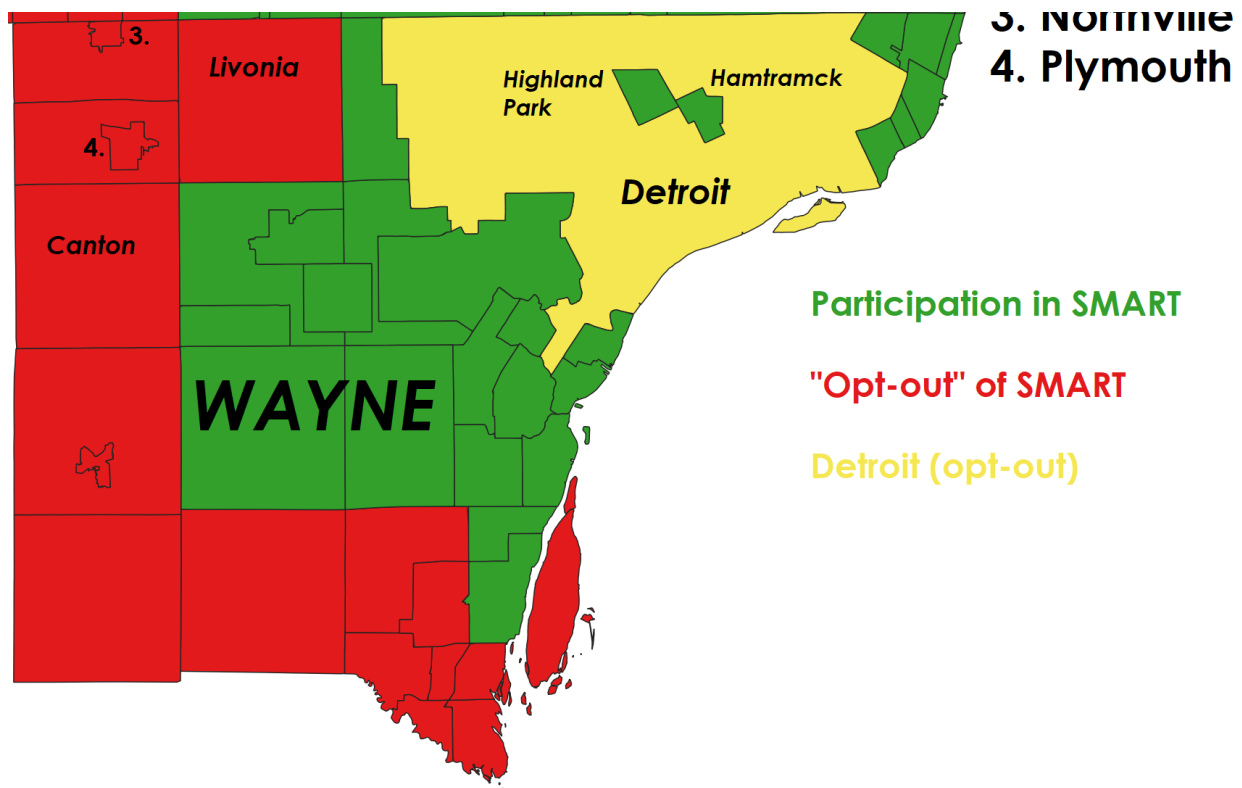
Timeline of Public Transit in Wayne County, 1967-2022

- 1967 The Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority (SEMTA) is created by act of the Michigan Legislature, but is never provided with an ongoing funding source.
- 1989 SEMTA is restructured as the Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation (SMART).
- 1995-6 Property tax millages to support SMART operations are approved by voters in Wayne County and Oakland County municipalities whose elected officials choose to “opt in” to the Wayne County and Oakland County Public Transportation Authorities (pass-through entities which fund SMART) and in the entirety of Macomb County, after the Macomb County Board of Commissioners places the issue on the ballot on a countywide basis.
- 2005 Livonia voters approve Mayor Jack Kirksey’s proposal for the city to quit SMART, eliminating most bus service in what is then Wayne County’s most populous suburb, based on the false premise that the city could provide sufficient transit itself at much lower costs.
- 2011 After the Great Recession and declining property tax revenues, SMART eliminates nearly one-quarter of scheduled fixed-route bus service, including many routes in Wayne County.
- 2012 Michigan Legislature creates the Regional Transit Authority (RTA) as an umbrella agency for metro Detroit (including Washtenaw County) transit service.
- 2014 To compensate for declining property tax revenue, an increased transit millage of 1 mill (up from 0.59 mill) is placed on the ballot and approved by voters in the SMART service area, winning a 66% overall majority in participating communities.
- 2016 A 1.2-mill tax proposal to fund improved transit via the RTA is narrowly defeated by voters in the 4-county region, despite winning a 53% majority in Wayne County.
- 2018 Wayne County Executive Warren Evans takes SMART to Farmington Hills and walks the remaining two miles to Twelve Oaks Mall, in the “opt-out” community of Novi, to dramatize the continuing need for improved transit. However, Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson and Macomb County Executive Mark Hackel oppose another RTA millage effort.
- 2020 The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates SMART’s shortage of drivers and leads to severe reductions in bus service.
- 2022 The transit millages supporting SMART are renewed by voters in Wayne, Oakland and Macomb Counties. 57% of Oakland County voters approve their first countywide transit millage, leaving Wayne County as the only county in the tri-county region without countywide transit.

Expanded Transit: An Urgent Need for Wayne County

Wayne County, the most populous county in Michigan, is also one of the largest counties in the United States without countywide public transit.

While public transit is provided in some portions of the county, including Detroit and most inner-ring suburbs, roughly **350,000 Wayne County residents**, accounting for one-fifth of the County's total population, **live in cities and townships without regular fixed-route public transit**. Two of Wayne County's four most populous communities, Livonia and Canton, lack fixed-route public transit (with the exception of a single Detroit Department of Transportation bus route to Livonia).



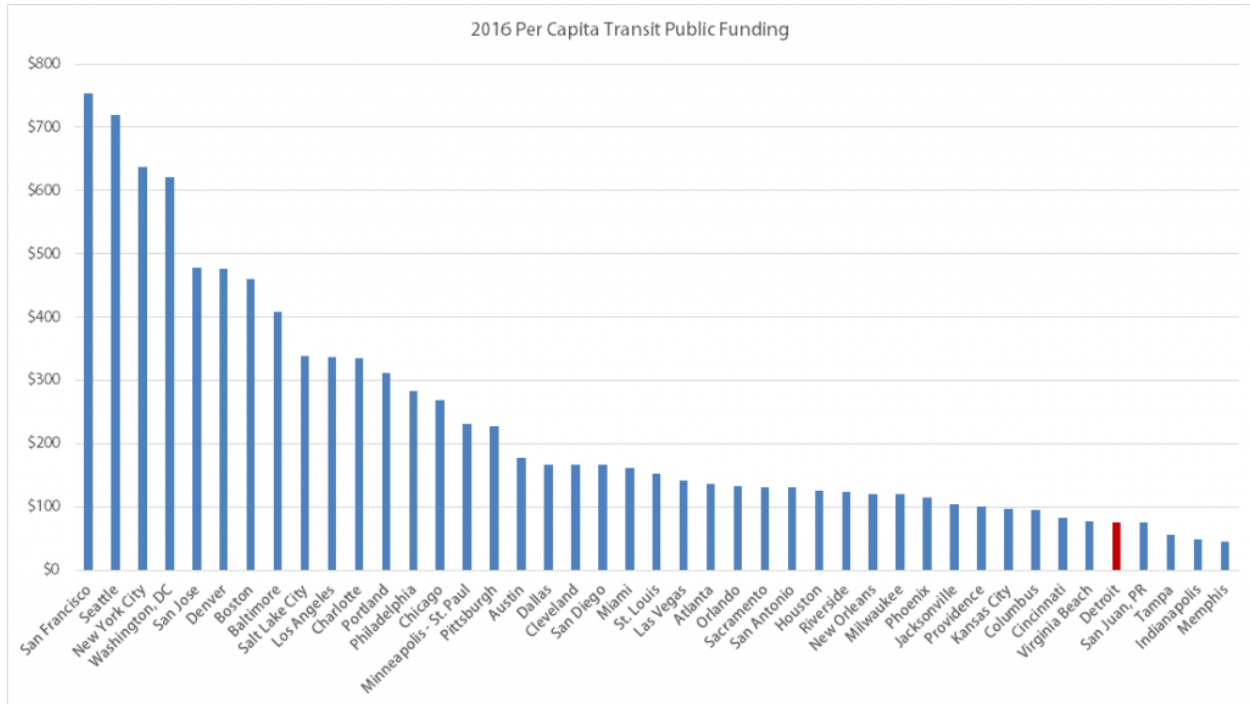
The majority of Wayne County municipalities (green) have been members of SMART since the current property tax funding structure was adopted in 1995, although Livonia quit SMART in 2005. Most of the "opt-out" communities (red) have not seriously reconsidered the question in the past quarter-century.

This leaves tens of thousands of hard-working people unable to access good-paying jobs, employers with limited employee prospects, seniors stranded when they retire from driving, and the county less able to compete for young professionals and the businesses seeking to hire them.

In those communities where public transit does exist, it is often quite limited. Most of Wayne County's SMART bus routes operate on an hourly basis and does not operate overnight and some doesn't operate on Sundays. This leaves tens of thousands of residents wasting hours of time every single day simply trying to get to work, school, doctors, shopping, and elsewhere.

Improving Public Transit in Wayne County

The lack of public transit in Wayne County is a consequence of limited investment. **The metro Detroit region invests just one-third of what most major metropolitan regions invest per capita in their public transit services** and sadly, it shows in our service levels and quality.



While this memo is primarily focused on how to expand transit services throughout the entire county, it is important to understand the role of transit underfunding in the county's limitations and potential solutions.

Option 1: A Multi-County Regional Transit Authority Millage

One strong option for improving public transit in Wayne County (and beyond) is a multi-county regional millage, put before voters by the Regional Transit Authority (RTA).

A four-countywide RTA ballot measure was narrowly defeated in 2016 despite 53% support in Wayne County. Macomb County has since blocked all efforts to place a four-county measure on the ballot and Republican leaders in the legislature failed to make necessary legislative amendments.

But given the new Democratic trifecta leadership in Lansing, the RTA should be able to get its enabling legislation amended to prevent Macomb from vetoing further action. Then **Wayne, Oakland, and Washtenaw Counties can place an RTA measure on their ballots in 2024** and campaign to pass it.

This approach would require more collaboration and several additional steps but might yield greater returns for Wayne County as well as for the region as a whole.

Legislative Changes needed to place RTA on the ballot

As currently structured, the Regional Transit Authority can only place a ballot proposal before voters in its full four-county jurisdiction (including Wayne, Macomb, Oakland and Washtenaw Counties). Doing so requires a vote from at least one representative of every jurisdiction on the RTA board (the four counties and the City of Detroit).

While nominally independent, RTA board members are appointed by County Executives (and the Mayor of Detroit) and have generally followed the lead of their respective executives. (Since Washtenaw County has no elected chief executive, its RTA board members are more independent.) Macomb County Executive Mark Hackel opposed placing an RTA measure on the ballot in 2018 and has continued to oppose another such effort.

To place another RTA measure on the ballot, then, will likely require amending the RTA legislation (passed in 2012) to allow for an RTA ballot proposal in a subset of the four-county region: three counties, for instance, or a subset of the counties.

Another option would be amending the RTA legislation to allow a simple majority of the RTA board to place a proposal on the ballot for the entire four-county region. However, this would risk further alienating Macomb County leadership and stoking further opposition to the ballot proposal.

A number of members of the Michigan Legislature have already expressed interest in amendments to the RTA legislation and Wayne County leaders should work closely with them and RTA leaders to inform the process.

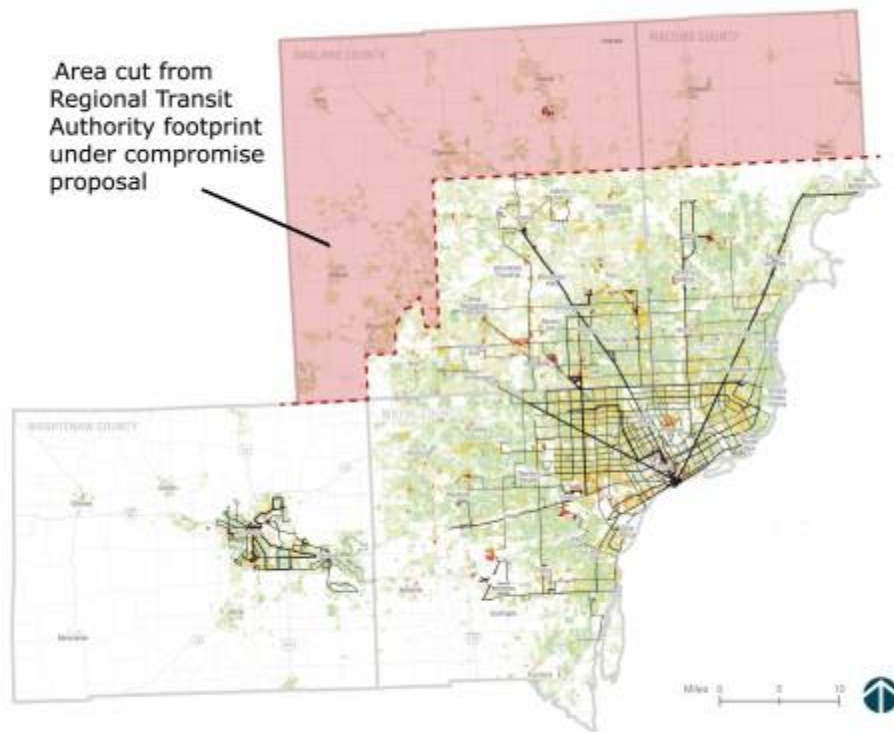
Proposal geography

As discussed above, it will be necessary to amend the RTA legislation to allow for a smaller ballot proposal footprint, excluding Macomb County.

County leadership in the other three counties is far more positive towards a potential ballot effort and a full three-county ballot measure would bring in more revenue for service. However, it may be advisable to allow for shrinking the footprint somewhat in other counties as well, in light of the fact that the entirety of Oakland County is now paying a millage for public transit.

In addition to allowing a county-level “opt-out” provision, then, the RTA amendments could empower the RTA and/or county leaders to determine the footprint of a millage within their county. Oakland County, for instance, might choose to exclude the “northern tier(s)” and/or “western tier” of townships from the millage footprint, recognizing that these communities have lesser transportation needs than the more urbanized southeast portion of the County.

Wayne County and Washtenaw County lack countywide transit millages, so they should ensure their entire counties are part of the ballot measure to ensure everyone in the counties get some level of transit service. (It is even possible, though doubtful, that Macomb County leadership might not oppose an additional millage limited to the southern portion of the County.) A similar approach (below) was discussed in 2018, but ultimately rejected after regional leaders failed to negotiate a satisfactory compromise.



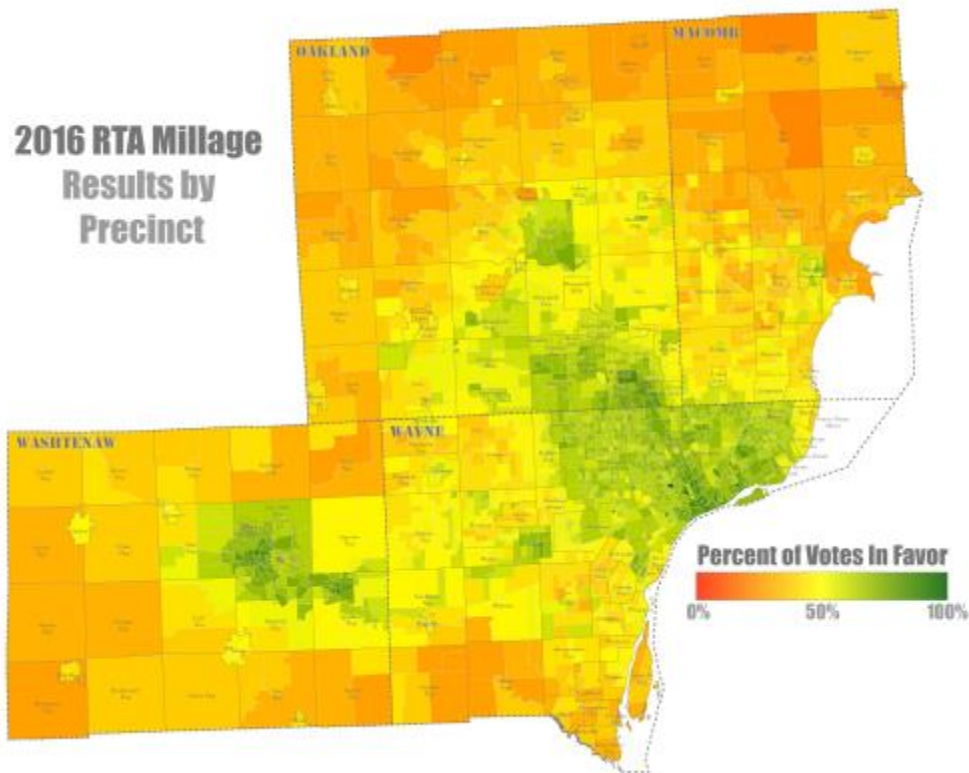
2018 RTA compromise proposal, removing northern portions of Oakland and Macomb County from the RTA taxation footprint. Motor City Freedom Riders

It would not be advisable, however, to allow elected officials in individual municipalities to decide whether to “opt in” or “opt out” of the proposal, as in the former SMART millage model. As the results of the 2022 Oakland County millage vote indicate, local elected officials (who are generally elected in low-turnout, “off year” elections) are not necessarily representative of the will of the

voters: a significant majority of voters in “opt-out” communities like Novi and Rochester Hills voted in favor of the Oakland County transit proposal.

Proposal strategy

If the 2016 RTA proposal had been placed on the ballot with Macomb County excluded—or even with the “northern tier” townships excluded—it would have received a solid majority of the vote. Although support was far from uniform in Wayne County and Washtenaw County, the large majority of “yes” votes in Detroit, Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti and southeast Oakland County communities would have more than compensated for the “no” votes in outlying areas (which are also much more sparsely populated).



2016 RTA transit millage results by precinct. Source: Motor City Freedom Riders

Obviously, however, it would be preferable not to risk another close election. **TRU is confident that another RTA proposal could be approved by a large majority**, given several conditions:

- A revised regional transit plan, giving equal weight to rapid transit along major corridors and enhanced bus service in other areas;
- A strong coalition that includes a wide range of community organizations as full partners alongside corporate leaders and elected officials; and
- A campaign that includes a significant field component; effectively communicates the value of transit to everyone in the region; and specifies what particular communities would receive from the transit proposal.

Funding levels and proposal contents

Even with some portions of the metropolitan region excluded, **a 1.2 or 1.5-mill transit proposal would yield considerable revenue**, nearly doubling the amount the region currently invests in transit and bringing the region closer in investment to comparable regions elsewhere in the nation.

The 2016 RTA Regional Master Transit Plan called for spending 40% of total funding (including local, state and federal dollars) on bus rapid transit (BRT) corridors; 27% on local bus service and “cross-county connector” bus service; and 7% on regional rail service between Ann Arbor and Detroit.

Marquee projects like regional rail service and Michigan Avenue bus rapid transit are of obvious importance. However, as described above, it would be worth considering allocating a somewhat higher proportion of funds to local bus service.

The 2016 plan, for instance, called for very limited new fixed-route transit services in the Plymouth-Canton and Downriver areas, focusing Wayne County revenues on bus rapid transit, regional rail, and “cross-county connectors,” only two of which (Fort-Eureka and Plymouth) extended into Downriver or western Wayne County. It would be important for a future regional transit plan to expand more significant fixed-route service into areas like Canton, Belleville, and southern Downriver (areas the 2016 plan neglected).

Process and Timeline

To summarize the process and timeline for getting a new multi-county RTA measure on the November 2024 ballot:

- 1) **State legislation to amend RTA** must be introduced, passed through both houses, and signed into law by the Governor – ideally fully completed **in 2023**
- 2) The **RTA and county leaders must agree** on the geography, timeline, and plan – likely in the fall and winter of **2023**
- 3) The **RTA board must vote** to place a measure on the ballot – in the **spring of 2024**
- 4) **A strong campaign** must be planned, funded, and implemented – in **the summer and fall of 2024**

Option 2: A Wayne County-wide SMART proposal

Another avenue for providing transit throughout all of Wayne County is for the County Commission to place a transit funding millage on the countywide ballot and invest the revenue itself, subcontracting with SMART and/or other agencies to provide it.

This is what Oakland County did in 2022, achieving a 58% yes vote and services being expanded into Novi, Rochester, and elsewhere in the coming months and more expansions expected next year.

While Wayne County has traditionally left it to individual city and township councils to decide whether to join the Wayne County Public Transit Authority and have SMART funding placed on their ballots, this is not the County's only option. Wayne County can and should follow Macomb and Oakland Counties' leads and embrace countywide transit. Just as **the County Commission can** vote to place other funding measures on the countywide ballot, they could vote to **place a countywide transit funding measure on the ballot**, replacing the WCPTA/SMART millage.

While voters approved a four-year renewal of the Wayne County Public Transportation Authority millage to fund SMART in November of 2022, Wayne County could place its own measure on the ballot at any time, replacing the WCPTA millage with a countywide millage.

Although the Oakland County Public Transportation Authority millage, which funded SMART, was already due to expire at the end of 2022, several other local transit millages—supporting the West Oakland Transportation Authority, WOTA, and the North Oakland Transportation Authority, NOTA—were not. Their millages were replaced by the passage of the countywide millage.

Wayne County autonomy and flexibility

One advantage to a County millage for transit is independence - it would not require Wayne County to wait on any other jurisdictions to move forward. A simple majority vote of the County Commissioners would suffice to place the proposal on the ballot.

One potential **disadvantage** to a County millage for transit is its implications for the County's ability to collect additional revenue in the future. Under Michigan law, counties are empowered to collect a total of 10 mills in County-collected property taxes. Wayne County is already nearing this **"10-mill cap."** The WCPTA millage does not count in this cap, while a countywide transit millage would.

The County currently levies a property tax of roughly 8 mills, including its permanent operating millage, additional voted operating millage, jail millage, parks millage, and soldiers/veterans millage. If a 1-mill County property tax for transit was approved by voters, therefore, the County would only have 1 additional mill of "leeway" to adopt an additional tax for any other purpose.

Contents and funding levels

While a countywide millage of 1 mill would substantially increase funding for transit in the County, it could not replace the City of Detroit's DDOT funding. Nor would it guarantee major improvements in transit service in communities already served, since the increased funding would be spread over a significantly increased service area and serving low-density areas is expensive.

A Wayne County-wide transit proposal of 1 mill would raise about \$50 million annually. (The county’s 0.94-mill jail millage, last approved by voters in 2020, is expected to raise about \$45 million per year.)¹ While a substantial increase over current transit funding levels, this figure would still leave Wayne County well behind most other metro areas, including smaller metro areas in Michigan.

For context, many transit agencies in Michigan are supported by millages that are substantially higher than 1 mill. Some agencies, like Washtenaw County’s TheRide, are supported by different millage levels in different jurisdictions.

TheRide (Ann Arbor city)	4.9 mills
TheRide (Ypsilanti city)	3.4 mills
CATA (Lansing area)	3 mills
MTA (Flint city)	1.825 mills
The Rapid (Grand Rapids)	1.5 mills
MTA (non-Flint Genesee County)	1.225 mills
SMART (metro Detroit)	~1 mill

The disparity in millage rates, as well as the disparity in property tax base between various jurisdictions, result in highly unequal levels of transit investment. CATA, for instance, anticipates 2023 property tax revenues of about \$25 million, about half as much as a Wayne County-wide SMART millage would generate, despite the fact that CATA’s service area contains about one-eighth as many people.²

A countywide 1-mill millage in Wayne County would allow SMART to **expand service into currently unserved portions of the county**, including major job centers such as Livonia and Canton. However, it would probably **generate only enough revenue to allow for modest improvements in service levels** in areas currently served and would not make Wayne County significantly more competitive with other metro areas.

Process and Timeline

- 1) **Develop a plan** for countywide expansion, in collaboration with SMART, community leaders, and transit stakeholders – in the summer/fall of 2023
- 2) The **County Commission would then vote** to place a transit millage on the countywide ballot – preferably in spring 2024 (must be done by July of 2024 to be on the November 2024 ballot)
- 3) A **campaign** must be planned, funded, and implemented to ensure voters know the benefits for their community – in **the summer and fall of 2024**

Questions for both

In addition to questions of interest and commitment from other counties and the state legislature, there are other questions you will need to consider over the next six months:

- **What new or improved services would Detroit get?** Neither case would raise enough money to replace DDOT so there would need to be a clear set of benefits Detroiters would receive from either a countywide or a multi-county transit measure.
- **What services will currently unserved areas of the County receive?** It is important that any new transit plan provides clear benefits to every community, so they know what's in it for them. But some of these low-density areas are challenging and expensive to serve.
- **Who will provide which services?** Macomb contracts with SMART for (nearly) all transit operations, but Oakland County chose to subcontract with several providers.
- **Who will be in charge of deciding the new services?** Oakland County chose to keep decision-making authority over transit plans and services within the County, establishing a new Commission committee for transit and hiring a new Transit Manager and two Transit Planners to work within the County.
- **What millage rate would provide what levels of transit service?** Our region has been sorely underfunded for decades. A significantly increased millage rate would bring in more revenue to provide more and better transit services to more communities, but would add to the already high property tax burden.
- **How to build an effective government-business-advocacy coalition to make either measure successful?** Successful transit ballot measures all throughout the county depend on an effective, well-coordinated, well-funded coalition of supporters to educate voters, build consensus, recruit champions, and run a winning coalition. Our region has failed in part because we have failed to truly collaborate among government, business, and advocacy leaders in the past.

Comparing Options

Both of the options described above should be given serious consideration. In fact, there is no reason why they cannot both be explored throughout 2023.

Option 2 (extending the **Wayne County millage countywide**) **has the advantage of simplicity**. It is within the power of Wayne County government to pursue without coordinating with other jurisdictions. Coordination would only be required with SMART, Detroit, and other Wayne County municipalities.

That said, **Option 1, the RTA measure, is superior in most respects**. An RTA ballot measure including some or all of Oakland and Washtenaw Counties would bring in significantly more revenue to expand and improve services. It could also enable cross-county transit like the Detroit-Ann Arbor commuter train. But it requires support and coordination from RTA, the Michigan Legislature, Oakland County, and Washtenaw County, among others.

TRU recommends that Wayne County leaders take steps towards both during the summer and fall of 2023 **and make a decision before the end of 2023** which will be most possible and beneficial to proceed with in 2024. Key legal actions aren't required until early 2024 to get either on the ballot in November of 2024.

We at TRU look forward to working with leaders in Wayne County as you explore these options, address these questions, and make plans to finally ensure everyone in Wayne County has the mobility options they need.

Prepared by Transportation Riders United

TRU is a Detroit-based nonprofit that believes everyone should be able to get where they need to go, regardless of whether they drive. We educate, advocate, and mobilize in support of more and better public transportation and other affordable sustainable mobility.

More at www.DetroitTransit.org