

SPECIAL SECTION

# Environment



REBECCA COOK

## Bumpy road ahead

### Finding funding for rapid transit likely to be difficult

BY JEFFREY KOSSEFF

SPECIAL TO CRAIN'S DETROIT BUSINESS

**A**nyone who's ever tried to leave downtown Detroit via I-94 at 5:30 p.m. on a weekday knows the area's transportation network is overstressed.

The Southeast Michigan Council of Governments and transit activists say it is time to get serious about taking cars off the road in favor of a rapid-transit system using buses and, perhaps, light rail. But finding ways to pay for an improved transit system for the area and changing the Motor City's commuting culture won't be easy.

The Detroit area has no lack of mass-transit ideas (see box). In each case, the idea would be a true rapid-transit system, one that runs separately from other modes of transportation in an exclusive right of way.

But plans such as these face significant obstacles. Funding is a big one.

Michigan's Constitution specifically prohibits the imposition of a

#### TRANSIT IDEAS FOR REGION

Two rapid-transit systems proposed for Southeast Michigan:

■ A plan under consideration by SEMCOG for **bus rapid transit**. BRT, a sort of "train on tires," could provide transit at a cost of \$11 million to \$13 million a mile, compared with \$25 million to \$56 million a mile for light rail.

■ A **commuter rail system** connecting Ann Arbor, Lansing and Detroit that would cost about \$130 million.

regional sales tax, which has been a favored funding source for transit in other parts of the country. To put a sales tax in place, voters statewide first would have to approve a constitutional amendment to allow regional sales taxes, then metro Detroit would have to approve the tax.

Raising local property taxes, already used to fund the **Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation** bus system, also would be a problem, said Dick Blouse, presi-

dent and CEO of the **Detroit Regional Chamber**.

"The politics of that wouldn't work," Blouse said. "A sales tax would be a more seamless way."

Because of disparities in property values, he said, every mill of property tax levied would raise about seven times as much from Oakland County than Detroit. One mill of property tax equals \$1 of tax for every \$1,000 in assessed property value.

The Detroit Regional Chamber hasn't formally endorsed a regional sales tax. It has, however, endorsed the need for regional rapid transit.

Federal funding, another big source of transit money nationally, has not been easy to get. Metro Detroit's two main transit agencies, the **Detroit Department of Transportation** and SMART, received less than 5 cents in federal funding for every passenger mile, while the country's top 30 transit agencies received an average of more than 17 cents a mile, according to an analysis of 1999 **Federal Transit Ad-**

ministration data.

The federal government ranks a transit system's productivity by passenger miles — the total number of miles all of its passengers ride on its vehicles in a year.

D-DOT received the second-smallest amount of funding per passenger mile out of the nation's 30 largest transit agencies. The reason, observers say, is that rail gets 80 percent of federal funding for new projects, leaving little to agencies that provide bus systems.

"Every other major urban area is receiving funding for rail transit," said Clark Harder, executive director of the Lansing-based **Michigan Public Transit Association**. "We don't have any major rail."

"Percentagewise, bus operations are 65 percent of transit in the country, but rail tends to be a little sexier. It gets a lot of new start money that we just can't access."

A SEMCOG poll in January of Southeast Michigan residents found that 59 percent would sup-



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## ENVIRONMENT

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# Transit: Road ahead is likely bumpy for finding funding for regional system

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port public funding for a regional transit system while 12 percent opposed funding the system. About 77 percent of the respondents said they would likely ride the system.

To raise enough federal funding for a regional transit plan, Michigan's community organizations and local governments must get behind the same strategy, said U.S. Rep. Carolyn Cheeks Kil-



Kilpatrick

patrick, D-Detroit, a member of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Transportation.

"We first have to decide what kind of system is realistic, how

we will finance it and who will oversee it," Kilpatrick said. "If not, dollars will continue to go to other parts of the country. States that come in coalition tend to get more dollars."

When debating the area's transit options, it's dangerous to advocate funding only one mode of transportation, Kilpatrick said. A successful transit system would contain improvements to the bus and road infrastructure and new rapid transit, such as light rail or bus rapid transit, she said.

And SMART and D-DOT must work together to improve bus service, Kilpatrick said.

Another hurdle for mass transit is the pattern of residential and commercial development in the Detroit area. Because dense business centers are spread across Southeast Michigan, any rapid-transit system would need to be supplemented with a large, and expensive, system of buses to feed passengers into it.

Coordination between feeder buses and rapid transit would be crucial to the success of any rapid-transit system, said Karen Kendrick-Hands, president and co-founder of Detroit-based **Transportation Riders United**.

"With a system working together synergistically, the ridership would greatly reduce the subsidies from government," Kendrick-Hands said. Transportation Riders United, which advocates for mass transit and lobbies against freeway expansion, has a 16-member board of directors. It recently became a membership-based organization and is seeking tax-exempt status.

But largely because jobs and population are so spread out, not everyone thinks a new rapid-transit system is feasible — or even desirable.

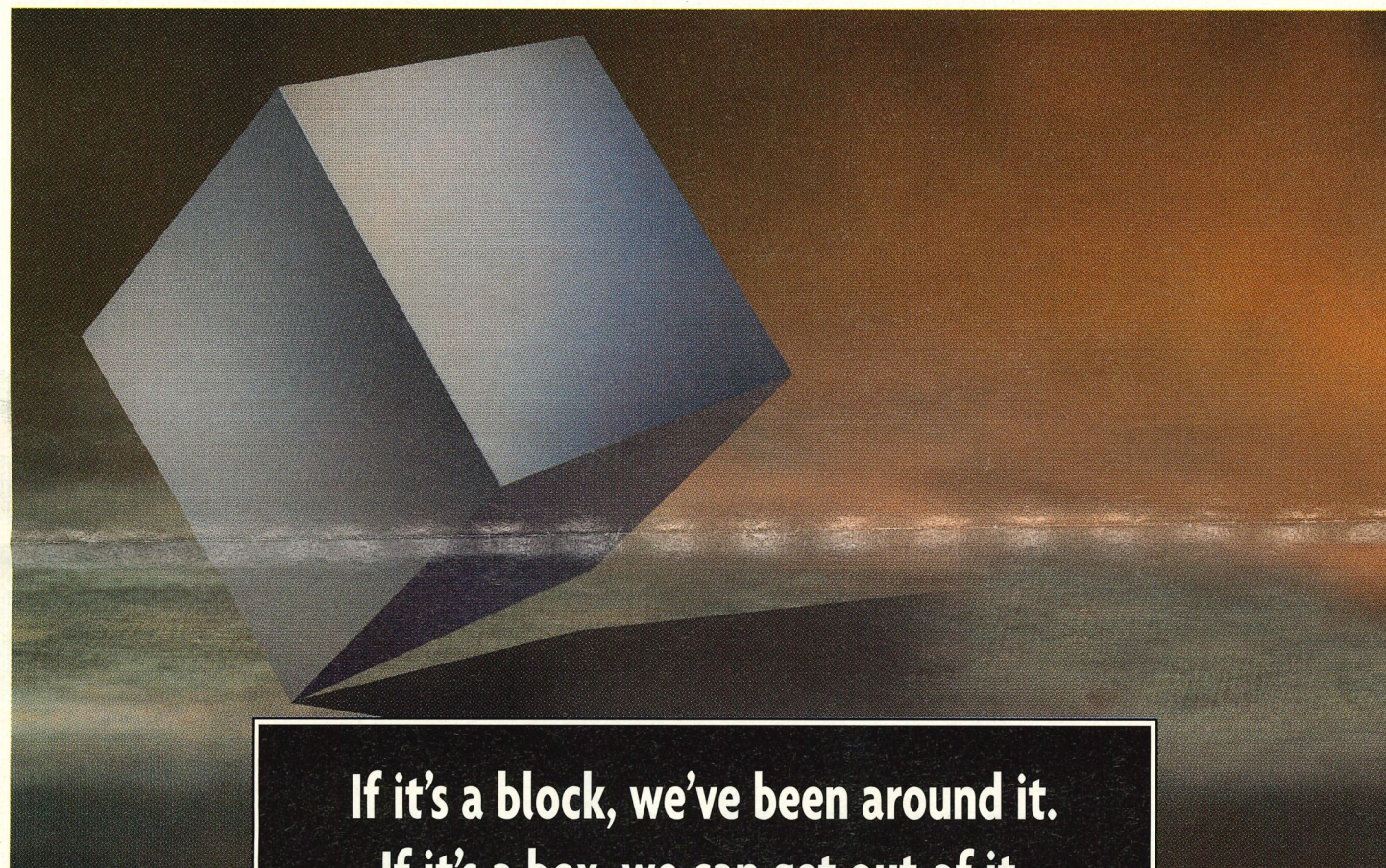
Dan Dirks, SMART's general manager, said demand for public transit isn't concentrated enough to support a large rail or rapid bus line.

"There's more employment in Troy than there is in downtown Detroit," Dirks said. "We are a lot more spread out than many areas."

SMART's bus system, he said, has identified its niche: people with limited or no access to cars. Dirks said he doubts there would be enough of that demand on any one rapid-transit route.

To meet their funding needs, transit systems must attract people who otherwise would drive cars to work in addition to those who are transit-dependent, said Kelly Thayer, transportation project coordinator at the Benzonia-based **Michigan Land Use Institute**. To do that, any regional transit should have a high-speed component, such as rail or bus rapid transit, Thayer said.

"In the winter, it's dark and icy, and the whole experience is unpleasant," Thayer said. "That's where trains are more attractive than buses."



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