

A Dream Derailed:
Public Transit Policy in Southeast Michigan
Late 1960s- Early 1980s

An Undergraduate Thesis

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Abstract

Today, Detroit is the only major U.S. city that lacks a comprehensive regional public transit system. Consequently, hundreds of thousands of Southeast Michigan residents, and especially Detroit residents, are deprived of the mobility they need to participate economically, socially, and politically in their region. Current transit deficiencies are a direct result of policy decisions over the past century that prevented the development of a regional transit system that could cope with the needs of Detroiters and their suburban neighbors. Perhaps the best opportunity to create a cohesive regional transit system for metropolitan Detroit occurred between the late 1960s and 1980, a period during which political will in support of regional transit peaked, and the federal government made public transit funding relatively abundant. While many metropolitan areas took advantage of this moment of opportunity to construct cohesive transit systems for their respective regions, Southeast Michigan policy-makers failed to successfully build the coalitions necessary to implement such a system. The region's painful history of fragmentation, facilitated by state governmental structure, historical trends of racial polarization, suburbanization, economic fluctuations, and other social, political, and economic factors, delayed comprehensive proposals throughout the 1970s. By the early 1980s, the optimism that many leaders held ten years before was dashed, and the primacy of suburban interests, exemplified nationally by Ronald Reagan's drastic reduction of federal funds for public transit, doomed any similar efforts for the decades to come.

Introduction

“The 1960s... was a decade of discovery,” intoned a 1970 report from the Metropolitan Fund. Among its 65-member Board of Trustees, this body included Max Fisher, Dr. Robben Fleming, Henry Ford II, Roman Gribbs, Joseph Hudson Jr., Kent Matthewson, James Roche, and Leonard Woodcock, representing a coalition between Southeast Michigan’s most powerful figures from business, the auto industry, organized labor, and the University of Michigan. The report, entitled “Regional Goals Setting: An Overview for Southeast Michigan,” expressed hopes of “a better way into the future” after a tumultuous decade of urban uprisings, cultural revolution, and economic prosperity. Placed crucially within this rhetoric of anticipation, the report cited two areas of discovery that would define the progress of their region. Contrasting with the triumphant tone of the rest of the section, one small paragraph acknowledged the discovery of “cleavages... between black and white, young and old, hawks and doves, cities and suburbs.” Second, and featured more prominently, the report heralded the recognition of planning- the need to fight the “frightening” growth and sprawl of cities, leading to “the need for controlling progress.”¹ The struggle between these two powerful forces, the former threatening to rip citizens further and further apart, and the second attempting to knit them back together, would come to define the 1970s in Southeast Michigan, and would continue to have major implications for the region in the decades to come. “A Dream Derailed” examines this struggle through the lens of one particularly controversial, yet essential policy area: the development of regional public transportation systems.

Without mobility, people become more and more isolated from economic life, social life, political life, and any other kind of life that gives us fulfillment. Those who can afford

¹ “Regional Goals Setting- 1976,” *Metropolitan Fund, Inc.*, 1970, SEMCOG General (Mel Ravitz), Box 914, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

cars take their mobility for granted, as physical distance is no obstacle, especially for the cars of today. Mobile Americans can apply for any job, and arrive on time every day. They can make a trip to any supermarket in their area and return home, reliably, in a matter of hours or minutes. They can seek out educational opportunities that can enrich their economic positions, or simply get to school on time every day to give themselves the best chance at a first-rate education. For those without a car, however, even these seemingly simple tasks can become nightmarish ordeals.

There is a simple answer to the mobility question, and it is one that has existed far longer than the car: public mass transportation. The world has relied on this form of transportation for centuries. Though they are not without their problems, many American cities still rely on robust public transit systems to ferry their citizens from place to place, allowing them to take advantage of the opportunities American life affords them, even if they do not own a car.

What is unique about Detroit and Southeast Michigan, however, is the remarkable absence of any semblance of a functional and efficient public transit system. As stated above, a region formed by and for the car invested itself completely in the development of infrastructure that supports cars, and suppressed private transportation's natural enemy—public transportation. The historical resistance to public transportation in Southeast Michigan is a major part of this project, and must be understood to identify the issues plaguing the region and its major city today, as well as to develop any solutions to the problem.

As a public service concerned with moving people, allowing them to traverse great distances, overcome geographic barriers, public transit policy is positioned advantageously at the intersection of regional cleavage between people and regional planning to bring them together. By identifying and analyzing the development of regional transit policy in Southeast Michigan, we can gain important insight into the essential barriers that prevent regional

cooperation and continue to divide citizens, and derive lessons regarding how our communities are constructed that can be applied to create equitable and sustainable solutions for the future.

A story so complex presents a number of possible angles of analysis. Because this study seeks to document the development of transit policy, the primary objects for analysis are those individuals and groups, whether governmental bodies or private interests, that were particularly influential in the discussion concerning, and creation of, that policy.

Additionally, the issue of transit in Southeast Michigan straddles multiple geographical and political jurisdictions. The scope of analysis must be sufficiently broad to encompass the major interests involved, including government at the local, regional, state, and federal levels, and extra-governmental bodies, while maintaining a specific focus on transit in Southeast Michigan. In order to satisfy these conditions, the data for this study derives primarily from Michigan state government documents, more specifically associated with the governor and his executive office. In combination with primary source data from other governmental bodies, such as the city of Detroit and regional agencies like the South East Michigan Transportation Authority (SEMTA), as well as media sources and previous scholarship, this study will illuminate the work of decision makers, which would ultimately determine the fate of transit policy. Through these documents it is possible to distinguish the essential issues policy makers confronted, how they conflicted or cooperated, what key factors informed and motivated their actions, and how these actions eventually decided the progress of regional public transportation in Southeast Michigan.

Though previous scholarship regarding 20th century urban issues has produced seminal and comprehensive work done on broader concepts such as the “urban crisis,” public transit has occupied somewhat of a peripheral role in explanations regarding the historical separation of urban centers from their wider regions. Works such as Thomas Sugrue’s *The*

Origins of the Urban Crisis, as well as *Detroit Divided*, by Farley, Holzer, and Danziger, provide a firm basis for exploring the motivations that drove the suburbanization and deindustrialization that brought industrial giants like Detroit to their knees.² Others have advanced the questions these seminal studies presented in important areas, bringing elements of the crisis into greater focus. For example, June Manning Thomas's *Redevelopment and Race* documents the urban redevelopment and renewal policies during the mid-20th century that decimated Detroit's urban core and forced its growing African American population into greater isolation and poverty.³ Other works, such as Tamar Jacoby's *Someone Else's House*, and Heather Thompson's *Whose Detroit?*, delve deeper into questions over integration struggles in major American metropolises and the socio-political forces at work in shaping policy priorities, respectively.⁴ The University of Michigan's own Matthew Lassiter has made essential contributions to conceptions of regionalism in terms of the urban-suburban divide, guiding scholarship away from misinterpretations of monolithic suburban power versus cities, and urging a closer examination of local motivations in distancing themselves from urban centers.⁵ Researchers in other fields, such as another member of the University of Michigan's faculty, Joe Grengs, have described the problem of "spatial mismatch" between urban residents and economic opportunities available outside the urban core.⁶

Works such as Zach Schrag's *The Great Society Subway* and Roger Biles' *The Fate of Cities* provide analyses of broader public transit policies during the latter half of the 20th

² Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), and Reynolds Farley, Sheldon Danziger, and Harry J. Holzer, *Detroit Divided* (New York: Russel Sage Foundation, 2000).

³ June Manning Thomas, *Redevelopment and Race: Planning a Finer City in Postwar Detroit* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013).

⁴ Tamar Jacoby, *Someone Else's House: America's Unfinished Struggle for Integration* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1998), and Heather Thompson, *Whose Detroit?: Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).

⁵ Matthew Lassiter and Christopher Niedt, "Suburban Diversity in Postwar America," *Journal of Urban History* 2013 39:3 (2012).

⁶ Joe Grengs, "Job Accessibility and the Modal Mismatch in Detroit," *Journal of Transport Geography*, Vol. 18, Issue 1 (January 2010): p. 42–54. Accessed 11 December, 2014.

century, and the work of various cities to develop their own mass transit systems during this period.⁷ However, scholarship that delves deeper into the impacts of public transit on metropolitan centers, especially in Detroit, remains underdeveloped. More recently, transit scholars such as Joel Batterman have begun to focus more specifically on the lessons that the public transit saga in Detroit illuminate, especially in areas dealing with suburban attitudes toward the city and the effects of continual opposition to public transit in the region.⁸ Further analysis is thus desperately needed to create a comprehensive picture of the full impacts of public transit policy in Southeast Michigan.

The documents preserved in archives by essential actors, such as Governor William Milliken, represent an opportunity to bring to light the positions and issues that such decision makers confronted during the critical period around the 1970s in Detroit. This study adds the conversations and specific efforts of public transit supporters and detractors from a vantage point not yet fully explored. Through close examination of their communications, responses to various approaches, and the plans they developed to remedy the problem of regional transit in Southeast Michigan, this study identifies the key actors involved in the policy-making process during this period and their interactions to advance or deter progress. This analysis argues that changes in federal policy, in response to urban social and financial crisis during the 1960s, opened a window of opportunity for regions like Metro-Detroit to implement comprehensive regional transit reform. New administrations in both the state capitol and in Detroit fought to take advantage of this window of funding, the structure of Michigan's regional governments, as well as the historical polarization between citizens, consistently frustrated concrete advancement. These forces of opposition and regional fragmentation

⁷ Zachary Schrag, *The Great Society Subway: A History of the Washington Metro* (JHU Press, 2014), and Roger Biles, *The Fate of Cities: Urban America and the Federal Government, 1945-2000* (University Press of Kansas, 2011).

⁸ Joel Batterman, "Color Lines: Race and Rapid Transit in Metropolitan Detroit, 1969-1980," A Thesis Presented to The Division of History and Social Sciences, Reed College, May 2010.

managed to delay planning and funding efforts long enough for this window of federal funding to close, beginning marginally in the late 1970s, and then completely in the 1980s with the administration of Ronald Reagan. Therefore, regional transit reform in Metro-Detroit during this period was ultimately destroyed by the loss of essential federal funding, after the region failed to unify behind proposals for a regional public transportation system.

To explain the context by which transportation policy became such an essential issue during Milliken's time as governor, the first chapter provides a general history of public transit in Southeast Michigan leading up to the crucial period before the 1970s. This section sets the stage for the urban transit struggles of the 1970s by documenting the historical trends of racial polarization and suburbanization that created a region fragmented enough to deny attempts to forge the cross-jurisdictional partnerships necessary to unify the region behind regional transit reform. Better known as the Kerner Commission, the publication of the report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders gave national voice to the motivations that informed the "discoveries" that the Metropolitan Fund described. This comprehensive report, ordered by President Lyndon Johnson's administration, determined the factors that caused the deadly urban conflagrations of the 1960s, including in Detroit, which set the country reeling. The Commission's diagnosis revealed a "nation moving toward two societies, one black, one white- separate and unequal." One of the primary causes of this societal rift, the Commission concluded were urban to suburban migration patterns that produced "growing concentrations of impoverished Negroes in our major cities," where they faced "deteriorating facilities and services," such as public transportation. In light of "inadequate municipal tax bases in the face of increasing demands for public services," as well as "new employment opportunities ...being created in suburban and outlying areas," the

report urged policy-makers to eliminate the barriers that prevented trapped urban citizens from socio-economic advancement.⁹

President Johnson's Great Society programs of the 1960s, as well as previous urban redevelopment policies, had not done nearly enough to remedy the chronic alienation of disadvantaged urban populations. Though the federal government continued to support the same policies that drove suburbanization and urban crisis, such as highway construction, it began to devote subsidies to help urban projects to fight endemic social hardship.¹⁰ Part of this reorientation of national priorities to address mounting urban problems was a greater emphasis on mass transportation. Though federal funding still heavily favored the development of automobile infrastructure such as highways, the passage of the 1964 Urban Mass Transportation Act represented a groundbreaking shift to allow for federal assistance for public transit systems.¹¹ Recognizing the plight of central cities nationwide, states like Michigan responded to this shift in federal policy. Thanks to a growing coalition between business, labor, and governmental leaders who shared a common interest in the vitality of major economic centers like Detroit, lawmakers crafted bodies like the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG) and the Southeast Michigan Transportation Authority (SEMTA) in 1967, to create the regional coalitions necessary to enact solutions to dire urban deficiencies.¹²

Thus, within this context of increased national attention to remedying entrenched urban issues, including support for public transit, chapter two introduces the figure of William Milliken, a reformist governor who would take up the cause of Detroit and its

⁹ The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, "Report of the National Committee on Civil Disorders," University of Washington Department of History, Accessed March 30, 2015, http://faculty.washington.edu/qtaylor/documents_us/Kerner%20Report.htm.

¹⁰ Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 260.

¹¹ Urban Mass Transportation Act of 1964, as amended through December 1978, United States Congress. Accessed March 27, 2015.

¹² "Regional Goals Setting- 1976," *Metropolitan Fund, Inc.*

imperiled public transit system. In his first few years as governor, roughly between 1969 and the mid-1970s, Milliken seemed to preside over a crucial window of opportunity during which the federal government supported regional goals, including urban transit projects, as well as heightened political will to remedy the declining situation in Metro-Detroit. Despite this early momentum, however, preliminary planning by regional bodies stalled in controversy, as well as in the face of increasing suburban power that opposed taking responsibility for urban problems. Because federal funding opportunities depended on unified regional support, outstate localities were able to keep transit projects from becoming reality.

Chapter three adds to this complex picture by introducing the role of Detroit in regional transit efforts. Under the guidance of the city's first African American mayor, Coleman Young, the struggling city was eager to solve Southeast Michigan's transit deficiencies for its citizens, but remained justifiably wary of cooperation with suburban interests. Young and Milliken seemed to form a strong partnership as transit planning progressed through the 1970s, but were still unable to marshal the necessary support, both among city officials and outstate policy-makers, that would allow them to take advantage of fresh commitments of federal funds for comprehensive transit reform.

The final chapter then documents the consummate failure of regional transit plans to come to fruition during the late 1970s and early 1980s, after the slow progress that had been made over the last ten years. These final efforts were summarily dashed by the economic policies of Ronald Reagan, who took office in 1980. In the face of drastically reduced federal funding, upon which most of the regional plans depended, suburban and outstate resistance to public transit expansion prevailed over planning and funding proposals by Detroit, state government, and regional agencies, closing the window of opportunity for regional transit in Southeast Michigan indefinitely.

Thus, this study expands on narratives that blame the defeat of regional public transit, and furthermore the decline of Detroit, on city mismanagement, or simplified analyses of racist suburban opposition. The policy documents analyzed here show more complex local motivations, such as competition for development projects, which contributed to delays, and reveal a state governmental structure that inherently opposed regional consolidation. Though racial discrimination was a primary factor in the development of forces that sufficiently blocked the implementation of regional transit policy, the utter loss of federal support, the only entity with enough financial might to create such a regional system, abruptly ended the dream of comprehensive regional transit reform in Southeast Michigan. By the 1980s, the building power of suburban and outstate communities was sufficient enough to reject the interests of regional responsibility, and with national policy directed away from regional solutions toward local protection, any further efforts were easily stifled.

I. Historical Context for Public Transportation in Metro-Detroit

1. Beginnings

Transit in Detroit first developed within the context of unprecedented economic and demographic trends. As the 19th century came to a close, Detroit was becoming a mature American industrial city, the 15th largest in 1900. The city's location allowed it to become a manufacturing center for a variety of products that incorporated the region's rich natural resources, such as metal ores and lumber, while factories produced chemicals and consumer products as well. An extensive system of rail lines connected the young city's industry with the rest of the country, and a steady influx of labor, from Canadian and European immigrants to rural migrants, including a trickle of African Americans, supported the burgeoning municipal economy and numerous diverse communities. Preliminary success during this period gave rise to a young and innovative industrial elite, with extensive amounts of capital and ambition.¹³

During the first few decades of the 20th century, this capital and innovation would combine to create the industrial juggernaut that was the automobile industry. With the materials and means of production established, the assembly line and investment in automobile production kick-started the production process that would define the Motor City, and by the early 1920's the industry exploded into maturity, dominated by the city's premier firms, such as Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler. A booming economy consisting of an abundance of well-paid positions requiring low skill levels precipitated a profound demographic shift, as populations flooded to Southeast Michigan from the South, as well as rural areas. By 1930, Detroit had the nation's fourth largest population- roughly 1.6 million, having grown four times as fast as the population of the U.S., with a 60 percent increase in

¹³ Reynolds Farley, *Detroit Divided*, 20-25.

the 1920s alone. A metropolis emerged, characterized by a patch-work of rapidly expanding ethnic enclaves, barely supported by the ageing and deteriorating housing stock in the central city.¹⁴

Detroit's economic prosperity and population growth also signaled the appearance of a robust working and middle class. Aided by city efforts to improve the city's streetcar system,¹⁵ Detroiters could afford to move farther and farther from the center of the city, at the same time following and supporting the decentralization of manufacturing to the outer urban rings, as well as the developing suburbs. State legislation passed in the 1920s halted further expansion of Detroit, though demographic and industrial expansion had already created a vast metropolis. Young and rapidly growing suburbs began to take hold in the region, which was developing into a network of industrial hubs with Detroit as its anchor.¹⁶ Thanks to state legislation that made municipal incorporation easy, and privileged already incorporated governments, these suburbs could not be annexed by the city, which stopped expanding territorially in 1929.¹⁷

These expanding middle and working classes not only relied on the automobile to supply their jobs, but increasingly for transportation. The explosion of production, coupled with substantial compensation meant the automobile transformed during this period from an upper-class amusement to a legitimate mode of transit for more and more families. Cars became an appealing option for traversing the metropolis, especially as distances between employment and home increased and road infrastructure received large amounts of public investment at the expense of mass transit. Another important motivation for private transportation rather than public must have been a result of the proximity and subsequent conflict between myriad ethnic groups, including a growing number of African Americans

¹⁴ Farley, *Detroit Divided*, 20-33.

¹⁵ Farley, *Detroit Divided*, 25.

¹⁶ Farley, *Detroit Divided*, 20-33.

¹⁷ Thomas, *Redevelopment and Race*, 31.

packed into ghettos around the center of the city. Cars and highway systems promised insulation from crowds and the perceived hostile urban environment.¹⁸

Thus, within this context of the unprecedented appearance of a mature industrial metropolis in the space of a few decades, mass transit itself played a prominent role, but already showed signs of eventual decline. Though Farley asserts that public transit in Detroit during this time was ineffectual, Detroit had benefitted from city transit since the 1860s. Privately-owned lines of horse-drawn streetcars converted to electric in the 1890s under pressure from Mayor Hazen Pingree, which merged in 1900 forming the Detroit United Railway (DUR). The DUR struggled to provide adequate transportation throughout the first two decades of the 20th century, as frenzied growth bred congestion and expansion began to outstrip the ability of lines to deliver more passengers over larger distances. Leaders in government and industry both supported plans for mass transit to connect the increasingly dispersed nodes of industry, from the concentrated capital in the central business district, to factories in the suburbs, to the communities that provided employees.¹⁹

In 1922, Detroit acquired the DUR, which was incorporated into the new Department of Street Railways (DSR), only the 3rd large American city to do so, and Mayor Couzens created the Rapid Transit Commission (RTC) in response to the recognized need for expanded and more efficient transit, both in the city and the region.²⁰ A string of experts were brought in, especially during the 1910s and 20s, advocating for, and designing systems from highways, to bus transit, to fixed rail lines like monorails and subways. However, lack of funding and political will doomed each and every project to failure.²¹ The DSR began

¹⁸ Thomas, *Redevelopment and Race*, and Charles K. Hyde, "Planning a Transportation System for Metropolitan Detroit in the Age of the Automobile: The Triumph of the Expressway," *Michigan Historical Review*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Spring, 2006), pp. 59-95. Accessed 6 November, 2014.

¹⁹ Hyde, "Planning a Transportation System for Metropolitan Detroit in the Age of the Automobile: The Triumph of the Expressway," pg. 59-75.

²⁰ "The Pre-DSR Years – Part IV: The Municipal Takeover of City Lines (1921-1922)," Detroit Transit History, Accessed 6 November, 2014, <http://detroittransithistory.info/TheCityTakeover.html>.

²¹ Hyde, "Planning a Transportation System," 59-75.

running motorbuses in 1925, and by 1932, it controlled and operated all public transit in the city.²²

Despite these developments, growing numbers of car owners saw little need for public transportation, which became increasingly associated with disadvantaged and therefore undesirable populations, such as African Americans trapped in the urban core. Blacks could not follow their white counterparts to the perimeters of the city and into the suburbs, restricted by racist housing covenants and other socio-economic constraints. The power of white middle and working class communities flexed their political muscles in funding battles over public transit, defeating each initiative by rejecting the prospect of contributing to a service that they no longer seemed to need. On the other hand, funding for private transportation infrastructure was abundant at multiple levels of government, which began to lay the foundations of an extensive road and highway network that would provide the groundwork for the highway expansions of World War II and its aftermath.²³ Though both private and public transit development largely ceased during the hard times of the Great Depression, World War II would jump-start industry once again, and spur regional planning once more.²⁴

2. The Mature Metropolis

Tom Sugrue provides the essential historical context within which the next few decades proceeded in Southeast Michigan. As he correctly diagnoses, the origins of Detroit's decline can be traced all the way back to when the city was reaching its pinnacle. After its essential role as the "Arsenal of Democracy" during World War II, churning out the war goods that helped win the war and transform the United States into a first-rate world economic and military power, optimism and confidence rippled through a city that

²² "The Pre-DSR Years – Part IV: The Municipal Takeover of City Lines (1921-1922)," Detroit Transit History.

²³ Hyde, "Planning a Transportation System," 59-75.

²⁴ Hyde, "Planning a Transportation System, 71.

approached two million people. The auto industry, the region's lifeblood, was running on all cylinders, not only producing the automobiles that would symbolize a new and lucrative consumer economy, but that supported a robust industrial middle-class. This workforce consisted of many blacks as well as whites, with relatively high wages supported by a powerful union movement in the United Auto Workers. In this way, the industry created demand for the consumer goods that characterized the post-war economy, and maintained a healthy tax-base for the city.²⁵

The opportunities for employment and quality of life that the region afforded attracted thousands upon thousands of Southern blacks, as well as rural whites, who both converged on the booming metropolis. Competition for employment, as well as well-documented prejudices that reproduced themselves across the United States at this time, fomented racial tensions, driving the residential ghettoization that defined many urban centers. As demographic data show, blacks were confined to tightly-packed neighborhoods closer to the urban core, while whites pushed out toward the edges of the city, and into the suburbs.²⁶

In terms of transportation, Roger Biles' recent article "Expressways before the Interstates: The Case of Detroit, 1945-1956" shows decision makers in Detroit were dealing with a dilemma. As early as the Great Depression years and the beginnings of the 1940s, Biles recalls a city dealing with the troubling trends of decentralization of industry and the white tax base that plagued the second half of the 20th century and persists today. Especially troubling to business leaders and city politicians who had invested so much in Detroit was the steady stream of people and money out of the central business district, the symbolic heart of their Detroit and the resting place of much of their capital.²⁷

²⁵ Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 17-32.

²⁶ Farley, *Detroit Divided*, 34.

²⁷ Roger Biles, "Expressways before the Interstates: The Case of Detroit, 1945-1956," *Journal of Urban History* (2014), Vol. 40(5) 843-854. Accessed 6 November, 2014.

Not only was the central business district losing its vitality, but it was increasingly affected by surrounding low-income, predominantly minority-filled neighborhoods that Sugrue described. Common across American cities during this period, city leaders believed these areas threatened the central city with low property values and decrepit housing, which was intolerable.²⁸

For Detroiters in this pivotal post-war atmosphere, race and transportation were two of the defining elements of their city. A 1952 Wayne State University study that surveyed everyday Detroiters on fourteen city issues such as housing, race relations, transportation, and schools, Detroiters ranked Negro-white relations and the Bus and Streetcar system the second and third most important issues, respectively.²⁹ While the report emphasizes the tendency of both white and black Detroiters to look favorably upon their city's economic advantages, as a "place to make a living," especially compared to the rest of the country, Detroit "as a place to live" received more negative feedback.³⁰ Not only did the survey cite a majority of whites who complained of the increased presence of Negroes that "intermingle" with whites, but blacks expressed a high degree of resentment over discriminatory policies. Much of this "intermingling" would of course occur in public spaces such as streets and the transit that ran along them.³¹ Though some Detroiters expressed their content with the current system, and even lauded the city for its efforts in building more roads and expressways, the majority of comments lambasted the "terrible" condition of public and private transportation. One respondent called the DSR the "worst streetcar system in the U.S.," while others complained of long wait times, high fares, slow service, and overcrowding. In fact, the DSR received the worst ratings of any of the fourteen activities analyzed. Specific complaints cited especially

²⁸ Biles, "Expressways before the Interstates," 843-854.

²⁹ Arthur Kornhauser, "Detroit as the People See It: A Survey of Attitudes in an Industrial City," (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1952), 69.

³⁰ Kornhauser, "Detroit as the People See It," 29-33.

³¹ Kornhauser, "Detroit as the People See It," 33.

poor service in “Negro areas,” lack of rapid transit, and the inability of the system to cover the entirety of the city.³² Car owners showed similar degrees of discontent, as traffic congestion and lack of parking severely hampered their ability to move about Detroit’s bustling streets.³³

In this evaluation of attitudes in Detroit during this period, the lingering racial animosity that had already caused racially-motivated rioting in 1943,³⁴ and would fuel coming conflagrations is clearly evident. Tensions between groups combined with the continued refusal to develop a public transit system that could address the economic and social realities of a global industrial metropolis that had burst into existence in half a century. Instead of inciting improvements, discontent with traffic and the DSR policy-makers contrived solutions that threw more private transportation infrastructure at the problem, while phasing out important aspects of public transportation, seen in the removal of Detroit’s streetcars in 1956.³⁵

Thus, with issues such as slums and congestion in mind, decision makers sought a way to support a faltering central business district and connect their interests, increasingly on the peripheries of the city or in the suburbs, and their investments downtown. In the Motor City, the automobile was the preferred mode to accomplish this connection. Cars require roads, and the roads that would connect the two points most quickly and effectively were highways and expressways. Leaders believed that not only would these large, multi-lane expressways allow traffic to move between the center of the city and its decentralized industry, but it would allow a way for commuters to bypass the undesirable elements in the slums, while easing traffic congestion.³⁶

³² Kornhauser, “Detroit as the People See It,” 112-115.

³³ Kornhauser, “Detroit as the People See It,” 27-28.

³⁴ Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 29.

³⁵ “A Brief Look-Back at Detroit's Transit History,” Detroit Transit History. Accessed 16 December, 2014. <http://detroittransithistory.info/index.html>.

³⁶ Biles, “Expressways before the Interstates.”

These trends in urban America did not go unnoticed in policy spheres not only on the local level, but nationally as well. Spurred by mid-20th century housing policies that funded the suburbanization of America, as well as the desperate need to transport war goods and instruments of industry across great distances, federal funding for transportation exploded during the 1940s and 50s, contributing to everything from interstate systems to urban networks. Interventions such as the 1956 Interstate Highway act, which pledged substantial federal support for highway projects, galvanized the proliferation of highways in the Detroit area, though as Biles points out, city leaders had already been planning and funding their highway projects and other urban renewal efforts, such as blight clearance, as early as a decade before. Initiatives such as the Detroit Plan of 1947 that attacked blight and invested in the central business district, with expanded transportation occupying a key role, exemplify the strategies that pervaded the era. Coupled with an innovative mixture of state, county, and city money, federal policy joined state and local policy in a powerful effort to revitalize the central city, and connect it with sprawling industry and housing.³⁷

In Detroit's case, the supremacy of the role of private transportation in this new system of connectivity is essential. It seemed inevitable that Detroit, a city built by the car, must also be built for the car, and the transportation policies that dominated this period bound the city's infrastructure to this idea like never before. Local leaders such as Mayor Cobo, as well as state planners, along with pressures from powerful interests such as the vibrant trucking industry, fervently rejected proposals for including mass transit as a part of transportation plans in the region, even when recommended by independent consultants. Dismissed as prohibitively expensive due to extra right-of-way costs, mass transit infrastructure such as fixed-rail transit along the medians of proposed road construction never appeared in Detroit, assuring Detroit's utter dependence on automobiles not just as economic

³⁷ Biles, "Expressways."

lifeblood, but as its means of transportation. Entrenching the obsession with automobile transit even further, officials ruled that auto-related revenue, which was used to fund new road and highway construction, could not be used for “ancillary” transportation needs like mass transit. Thus, not only was mass transit in Detroit a political non-starter during this period, the ability to fund any future projects was gutted from the outset. In 1951, Detroit’s new master plan crystallized the policy agenda that had begun with the 1947 Detroit Plan, declaring the city’s commitment to the central business district, peripheral development, the car industry, and the highways that supported it, at the expense of residents in urban ghettos slated for blight removal and any semblance of public transportation that they could afford.³⁸

Here, June Manning Thomas’s *Redevelopment and Race* picks up the story as the city fell into “a vicious cycle of seeking relief from traffic by accommodating more and more automobiles.”³⁹ She reiterates the role of Federal policy as well, such as the Federal Highway Act of 1956, the funds of which constituted an “irresistible temptation” to construct highways, and further neglect “atrophied” public transit. Coupled with intense pressure from the auto industry, public transit, and especially rail transit, fell by the wayside.⁴⁰

White Detroiters took their cues from policy that advantaged suburban living and perpetuated the urban problems discussed in the Wayne State survey, bought cars, and left. This “balkanization of the metropolis” increased and solidified geographic divisions between blacks, who were restricted to the central city by restrictive white neighborhood covenants and real-estate redlining.⁴¹ Sugrue describes the “deproletarianization” of blacks in Detroit, whose numbers continued to grow in the 1950s and 60s, but suffered the consequences of prolonged discrimination and deindustrialization that made them losers in the fight for housing and employment. By 1967, blacks constituted one-third of the city’s population, but

³⁸ Biles, “Expressways before the Interstates,” and Thomas, *Redevelopment and Race*, 68-69.

³⁹ Thomas, *Redevelopment and Race*, 68.

⁴⁰ Thomas, *Redevelopment and Race*, 68.

⁴¹ Farley, *Detroit Divided*, 34.

discriminatory housing policies confined them to disadvantaged areas that perpetuated conflictual attitudes between white and black communities. Though the newfound black political power through the ballot helped elect reform-minded mayor Jerome Cavanagh in 1961, the immense amount of Federal War on Poverty assistance that he drew did little to alleviate systemic urban problems, as it went toward conventional and ineffective programs.⁴² Thus, tensions between an increasingly impoverished, disenfranchised black population and an overwhelmingly white police force came to a head in the violent uprising of 1967, which not only exemplified the level of frustration black Detroiters felt, but accelerated trends of white flight into the suburbs and initiated a severe backlash from communities that were threatened by black communities that they perceived as inherently criminal and violent.⁴³

3. A Decade of Discovery: Policy Shifts of the 1960s

Exacerbated by federal policy, the general gutting of urban populations and resources drove cities across the country to appeal to Washington for financial assistance. By the early 1960s, national leaders were beginning to listen to the leaders of the nation's largest metropolises, from Philadelphia and Chicago to Detroit and Boston. Despite resistance from many conservatives that disapproved of federal involvement in local problems, federal subsidies for city transit projects were gaining traction.⁴⁴

Initiated by the John F. Kennedy administration, federal policy began to emphasize comprehensive regional planning with specific goals to subsidize urban projects.⁴⁵ In 1964, the Urban Mass Transportation Act answered urban America's cry for help with public transit systems, authorizing "the Secretary of Transportation to provide additional assistance for the

⁴² Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 260-264.

⁴³ Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 260-264.

⁴⁴ Joseph Mathewson, "Mass Transit Aid: Congress Is Leaning Toward U.S. Funds for Bus and Rail Systems," *Wall Street Journal*, February 12, 1963, Accessed March 27, 2015.

⁴⁵ Herman Mertins, Jr., "The "New Federalism" and Federal Transportation Policy," *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (May - Jun., 1973), pp. 243-252. Accessed March 31, 2015.

development of comprehensive and coordinated mass transportation systems.” Lawmakers recognized that “Federal financial assistance for the development of efficient and coordinated mass transportation systems is essential to the solution of these urban problems.”⁴⁶ Offering to cover two-thirds of urban mass transit projects, the Department of Transportation made a preliminary sum of almost \$400 million available for demonstration projects and transit studies. As the 1960s progressed, legislators recognized the need to substantially augment these initial funds, amending the original act in 1968 to add billions of dollars to funding reserves, and increasing the provision period to twelve years, indicating significant and long-term financial support for urban transit. A new agency, the Urban Mass Transit Administration (UMTA), was also created as a 1968 provision, assigned to operate within the larger Department of Transportation and administer assistance to the nation’s cities. Further monetary additions occurred well through the 1970s as well, including a lower level of assistance for municipal transit operations, to supplement previous provisions dedicated to capital projects.⁴⁷

Thus, the unprecedented expansion of federal funding during this early period created powerful incentives for state and local governments nationwide that sought assistance for improving and expanding public transportation systems. In Michigan, political and business leaders, equally concerned about the deteriorating situation in major investment centers like Detroit, formed powerful coalitions such as the New Detroit Committee and the Metropolitan Fund. Together with city and state interests that advocated swift and comprehensive action to save declining metropolitan centers, these coalitions supported the passage of state legislation in 1967 to create SEMTA and SEMCOG, both necessary to unite the region and qualify for federal transit assistance.⁴⁸ With these agencies in place, leaders hoped to introduce a new era

⁴⁶ Urban Mass Transportation Act of 1964, United States Congress.

⁴⁷ “Federal Assistance for Urban Mass Transportation,” UMTA, U.S. Department of Transportation, prepared by the Office of Public Affairs, April 1979, Accessed March 31, 2015.

⁴⁸ “Regional Goals Setting- 1976,” *Metropolitan Fund, Inc.*

of regional planning, including a comprehensive regional transit plan that would reverse the economic fortunes of Detroit, and bring cohesive development to the region as a whole.

II. A Vision for the 1970s: Governor Milliken and Early Efforts

1. A New Direction

As the 1970s began, Michigan seemed to finally be responding to its need for regional connectivity through transit. State government, with William Milliken at the helm was responding, creating the agencies to plan and oversee, and even fund the efforts that could finally deliver Southeast Michigan citizens a cohesive, functional system. The optimism and beauty of the first major SEMTA plan symbolized the belief among some decision-makers that comprehensive transit reform could come to the Motor City and its neighboring communities. Funding from the federal government, as well as financial backing from core, regional private interests, seemed poised to support a new regional vision. Implementing this vision, however, stalled early, even with such political and financial might behind it. As more officials began to recognize, regional transit would take much more than plans and money- it would take a unified, regional effort. As time went by without decisive action, transit supporters began to confront the deep, systemic barriers to such unification. The forces of fragmentation were rooted deep not only in the cultural development of its citizens, but the political and economic structures that had informed it. This era was the best chance for regional transit, but it coincided with the maturation of those systemic forces that would rise to oppose it.

Even before his inauguration in January 1969, Michigan's new governor William Milliken struck a tone of progressive reform. Characterized as a moderate Republican, his first State-of-the-State address, delivered as governor-elect, emphasized his commitment to, among other themes, "human rights and crime," as well as "urban-oriented government."⁴⁹ Despite his "nice guy" image, Milliken risked alienating many of his outstate constituents by

⁴⁹ Dave Dempsey, *William G. Milliken: Michigan's Passionate Moderate*, (University of Michigan Press, 2006), pg. 66-69.

declaring himself a proponent for decisive action to solve urban problems, and chiding outstaters for their lack of cooperation with cities:

Those citizens of Michigan who live in remote parts of the state...cannot sit smugly by, in tranquility, while our cities sink in despair... The well-being of each of us, and the quality of our own existence and that of our children, is bound up with the lives and well-being of countless others whose lives may never directly touch our own.⁵⁰

In the decade to come, his resolve and tact as a politician would be tested in his pursuit of solutions to urban problems.

On February 18th, 1969, Milliken reiterated his commitment to Michigan cities and their problems in a special address to the legislature. In it, the governor announced the creation of an Urban Affairs office, situated strategically in Detroit, and urged legislators to cooperate to save “our cities...from the decay and despair that is having an adverse human and economic impact on all of Michigan.” He also saw the need to justify the budget he recently submitted to the legislature, which featured a budget increase of 11 percent, potentially unpopular in large part for its inclusion of a 23 percent increase in funds allocated to the Southeast Michigan region, and a total increase of \$221 million for Detroit. Finally, the governor successively addressed civil rights and transportation, first announcing his pride that Michigan’s new constitution established a Civil Rights Commission (CRC), and his commitment to increase the CRC’s budget by 60 percent. He condemned Michigan’s discriminatory past, and pledged to enforce his state’s laws equitably. Milliken then eased into the touchy subject of transportation. Couched in a general transportation funding increase, including praise and support for Michigan’s highway systems, the governor transitioned to the need for “systems of urban rapid mass transit,” which he conceded would be “very complex and expensive.” To address such complexity and cost, Milliken proposed a state governmental body to oversee planning and coordination.⁵¹ Encouraged by a federal

⁵⁰ Dempsey, *Milliken*, 66-69.

⁵¹ William Milliken, “Special Message to the Legislature on Urban Affairs,” February 18, 1969, Urban Affairs Information, Box 934, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

grant of \$600,000,⁵² provided through the federal Urban Mass Transportation Act of 1968,⁵³ the new governor wanted “\$300,000 of state funds” to match, forming a commitment to urban public transportation and the new SEMTA. To be sure, outstate legislators would have bristled at the last few lines of the section, emphasizing the new direction toward “a more balanced transportation network, particularly suited to the needs of urban residents.”⁵⁴

A few months later, Milliken took to the airwaves to speak on his urban agenda. Broadcasting from Detroit, the governor noted it was his 20th time visiting the city in just 12 weeks in office, exemplifying his recognition that “officials of the city and state must work together...to save this city or together we shall perish in its decay...or in its flames.” “Each time one person’s faith in the city dies, the bell tolls for us all,” Milliken eloquently continued, before launching into more concrete fiscal and intergovernmental policy. Despite community leaders’ assertions that “money alone won’t save the city,” he urged the Detroit Common Council to approve Mayor Gribbs’ proposal to raise revenues through additional property taxes, and increased income taxes for both residents and non-residents, as well as excise taxes on goods and services related to amusement activities. Proposing new taxes on Detroiters, who already paid four times as much income tax as non-residents, was dangerous territory for both the mayor and the new governor. However, a pledge to use state funds to support the city, to the tune of \$450 million- a sum roughly equal to the city’s entire budget-sweetened the deal, and contributed to the optimism of Milliken’s belief that “we are moving into a new era of cooperation between state and local government.”⁵⁵

⁵² Philip D’Anieri, “Regional Reform in Historic Perspective,” Metropolitan Planning Institutions in Detroit, 1950-1990,” A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Urban and Regional Planning) in The University of Michigan, 2007, Accessed March 30, 2015.

⁵³ Southeast Michigan Transportation Authority, “Rapid Transit Along Woodward,” No Date (1971-2), EC. 4d Detroit Transportation- Public Transportation, Subject Vertical File, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, 1-3.

⁵⁴ Milliken, “Special Message to the Legislature on Urban Affairs.”

⁵⁵ Remarks prepared for delivery by Milliken for radio and T.V. report to the people on Urban Problems, April 14, 1969, Urban Affairs Information, Box 934, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

By May of 1969, the essential promise of regional cooperation was put into further jeopardy. In a meeting with Governor Milliken, SEMCOG representatives hoped to carry both their noted positive relationship with the previous administration, as well as their eagerness to move forward with their regional projects. Though community opposition to SEMCOG's regional structure and mission seemed to have declined, representatives appealed to the governor's office to kill Senate Bill 600 in the Michigan legislature.⁵⁶ Introduced by Senator Robert Huber, the bill represented a threat to the funding and organization of SEMCOG, which still depended on voluntary membership from local governments,⁵⁷ and a few hundred thousand dollar budget left over from the Regional Planning Commission. According to SEMCOG, regional acceptance of their authority showed need for improvement, as a few governmental bodies were still "delinquent," or had dropped out after initially joining. The bill proposed overly restrictive procedures that would slow down the organization's work, and a stipulation to require the city of Detroit to join, which would in turn discourage suburban governments to participate in a body dominated by the city.⁵⁸ Early resistance strategies such as this from the Michigan legislature cast a shadow of doubt over Milliken's administration to accomplish its lofty goals.

As his first year in office came to a close, the administration's progress proved slow in the face of urban problems of such magnitude. In a December memo to the governor's office, Milliken's closest advisors, including John Dempsey, the man he appointed to spearhead his Urban Affairs department, signaled increasing frustration. Citing "limited state resources" to respond to "unlimited urban needs," the diminutive Council on Urban Affairs needed to be

⁵⁶ Memo from Dempsey to Gordon regarding SEMCOG meeting with Governor Milliken, May 12, 1969, SEMCOG General (Mel Ravitz), Box 914, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

⁵⁷ Memo from SEMCOG to the Michigan Legislature on reasons discouraging the passage of Senate Bill 600, May 1969, SEMCOG General (Mel Ravitz), Box 914, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

⁵⁸ Memo Dempsey to Gordon, May 12, 1969.

expanded to create any desired impact. Echoing a number of reports, such as the Detroit Regional Transportation and Land Use Study (TALUS) and the Urban Detroit Area Research project (UDA), which saw the population of Southeast Michigan doubling in 30-50 years, the memo emphasized local government's inability to deal with the depth of urban problems, and extended this criticism to regional governments like SEMCOG.⁵⁹

Thus, Milliken's first year began with an optimistic state commitment to urban problems. Along with political leaders across the country that recognized the need to remedy entrenched urban problems, robust federal financial support for mass transportation seemed to indicate a difficult, yet achievable future for regional public transit. However, within a few short months, the administration began to experience the frustration that would pervade the coming decade. Time would tell if the governor's inspiring, if controversial proposals could overcome the immense barriers to regional cooperation and public transit improvement that loomed in the 1970s.

2. New Governments and Agencies

As the 1970s began, Milliken's embattled administration continued to assert its commitment to urban issues. A January 1970 executive directive to his department heads voiced support for Michigan's continued participation in the federal Model Cities program, calling it the "most effective and economical concentration and coordination of federal, state, and local public and private efforts to improve the quality of urban life."⁶⁰ In February, the governor proposed direct state grant of \$5 million to Detroit. This sum could buy nothing but good will, considering Detroit's budget shortfall of over \$60 million, but Mayor Gribbs called it a "first step" and "demonstrated commitment" from state government.⁶¹ A February

⁵⁹ Memo from John Dempsey, Roy Williams, and John Koval to Governor Milliken, December 2, 1969, Transportation, Box 915, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

⁶⁰ Executive Directive No. 1970-1, Governor Milliken to Department Heads, January 13, 1970, Council for Urban Affairs, Box 934, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

⁶¹ Transcript of Governor Milliken's proposed \$5 million grant to Detroit, February 8, 1970, Urban Affairs, Box 934, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

Urban Affairs council meeting was assured that the body would receive the administration's "highest priority."⁶² Still, the planning and implementation work for Milliken's priority would depend on the success of the state and regional agencies that, though only a few years old, were tasked with taking the first steps toward a comprehensive regional system.

In April, SEMCOG seemed to be making progress. The planning division, in partnership with SEMTA, the Department of State Highways, the city of Detroit, the city of Highland Park, the Oakland County Road Commission, and the Wayne County Road Commission, completed a study of the region's five radial corridors extending from Detroit's Central Business District (CBD). The study assessed problems, and evaluated each corridor for possible improvements, "specifically aimed at peak-hour congestion problems within CBD-oriented corridors." Importantly, the initiative included an emphasis on public transit as well as highway and road infrastructure, hoping to "detail specific action programs aimed at increased commuter service, express bus service, downtown distribution service improvements, suburban park-and-ride lots, and highway traffic control improvements." Finally settling on the Woodward corridor, extending from the Detroit River, bisecting Detroit, and continuing to the northwest through Oakland County to Pontiac, SEMCOG prepared, and unanimously approved a grant application to the federal Department of Transportation totaling \$264,000 to fund the planning phase of improvement projects.⁶³

This particular case of transportation planning was significant for a few key reasons. First, the grant application was prepared "in response to a joint Urban Mass Transit Authority (UMTA) and Federal Highway Administration (FHA) Urban Corridor Demonstration Program," the very first effort by the Department of Transportation to support improvements

⁶² Urban Affairs Council Meeting, February 12, 1970, Urban Affairs, Box 934, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

⁶³ Memo from Planning Division regarding Urban Corridor Demonstration Program, April 17, 1970, Agendas-Meetings SEMCOG, Box 914, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

of both highways and urban public transportation.⁶⁴ It also demonstrates a relatively successful joint operation between a Southeast Michigan local and regional government, seeming to inspire hope for future successful collaborations. However, it is important to note that obvious points of contention were removed from the process. Clear benefits for each constituency- public transit for urban interests, and private transit infrastructure for suburban interests ensured that neither city nor suburb felt slighted in favor of the other. Furthermore, the crucial question of financing was covered entirely by the federal government, removing the need to shift local or state funds in order to cover the cost of the project. Nevertheless, this case represents a small step toward regional transit, which cannot be overstated. Though not a concrete infrastructure project yet, regional bodies like SEMCOG and SEMTA were beginning to turn their prescribed missions into concrete planning, though much more work had to be done to turn planning into implementation.

Reasons for optimism continued into May, as Senate Bill 600, which so threatened the vitality of SEMCOG, SEMTA, and regional coordination in general, looked likely not to pass.⁶⁵ SEMCOG chairman Mel Ravitz happily reported that the state House of Representatives approved a recommendation to \$2.6 million in funding for SEMTA, and went on to commend the “close” relationship between SEMTA and SEMCOG.⁶⁶ In September, SEMCOG announced they had acquired TALUS and UDA, two of the most sophisticated studies in terms of urban needs to date, and were using the recommendations from the two studies to inform new planning efforts already underway.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Memo Urban Corridor Demonstration Program, April 17, 1970.

⁶⁵ SEMCOG Memo, May 8, 1970, Agendas-Meetings SEMCOG, Box 914, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

⁶⁶ SEMCOG Memo, May 23, 1970, Agendas-Meetings SEMCOG, Box 914, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

⁶⁷ SEMCOG News Release, September 22, 1970, SEMCOG General (Mel Ravitz), Box 914, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

As that fall progressed, however, a bleak budgetary picture overshadowed much of the planning work being done. Without the power to levy its own taxes, agencies like SEMCOG depended on allocations from the state, which was controlled by the legislature, and thus not readily available despite the governor's pledges. Additional funding came from dues from member governments, grants, and the private sector, but even these sources were often insufficient for the regional scope of their efforts.⁶⁸ Designed not to usurp local authority, but safeguard local power, the agency's voluntary membership policy created instability as well, as SEMCOG reported that though most governments joined, a few remained "delinquent," or had dropped out.⁶⁹ Furthermore, as young organizations, procedural inefficiencies were rampant, including certain glaring problems. For example, the fiscal year calendar was aligned in such a way that SEMCOG lost large portions of funding due to legal technicalities. These factors contributed to what one official described as "budget agony," as SEMCOG searched for more sources of funding, but continually fell short of the amount needed to sustainably run the agency, let alone expand it.⁷⁰

3. SEMTA and Early Planning

Perhaps the centerpiece of preliminary planning efforts by regional agencies during this period was SEMTA's "Rapid Transit Along Woodward" plan, published in 1971. Established along with SEMCOG in 1967, SEMTA's first major planning initiative reiterated the agency's purpose to "plan, acquire, construct, operate, and contract for transportation facilities in Wayne, Oakland, Monroe, Washtenaw, St. Clair, and Macomb" counties. Interpreting their existence as "proof that the state of Michigan [wanted] to improve public

⁶⁸ Memo from Executive Director Turner to SEMCOG Executive Committee, October 31, 1970, SEMCOG General (Mel Ravitz), Box 914, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

⁶⁹ SEMCOG, SEMCOG Data Digest, 1973, SEMCOG General (Mel Ravitz), Box 914, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

⁷⁰ Memo Turner to Executive Committee, 1970.

transportation,” SEMTA planners believed they were laying the groundwork for a “balanced” transit system for the region.⁷¹

Like SEMCOG, SEMTA lacked the ability to levy its own revenue from its regional constituents. Fortunately, federal legislation now allowed SEMTA to receive grants from the Urban Mass Transportation Administration and the national Department of Transportation, supplemented by funds from the Michigan Department of Commerce through the Bureau of Transportation, in order to complete the study. Led by its first chairman, William Marshall, the president of the Michigan AFL-CIO, and galvanized by the 1971 addition of General Manager Thomas Lipscomb, whose recent leadership role on a state-of-the-art subway line through New Jersey to Philadelphia injected modern vision and optimism, SEMTA steadily began to assert itself.⁷²

In addition to developing the Woodward plan, SEMTA’s first few years of operation involved consolidating and improving the various private bus systems that serviced communities around Detroit. Recognizing the difficulty many Detroiters experienced commuting into the suburbs for work; SEMTA implemented a small cadre of Employment Express buses in 1970. In 1971, the regional agency acquired and began managing its first suburban system, the Lake Shore Line, improving its infrastructure by adding buses and routes. With the help of local, state, and federal funds, SEMTA officials confidently announced the imminent arrival of \$6.6 million worth of new buses, built by General Motors. According the plan, the essential merger with Detroit’s DSR could be completed within a few short months, with the rest of the regional systems to follow, establishing a unified transit network for Southeast Michigan.⁷³

⁷¹ Southeast Michigan Transportation Authority, *Rapid Transit Along Woodward*, pg. 3, EC. 4D: Detroit- Public Transportation, Subject Vertical File, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

⁷² SEMTA, “Rapid Transit,” 1-3.

⁷³ SEMTA, “Rapid Transit,” 4-5.

The axis around which this new regional system would revolve was Woodward Avenue, Detroit's main thoroughfare that began in the CBD and extended northwest through Oakland County to Pontiac. Beneath this historic avenue, SEMTA planners envisioned an underground rail line that would extend from the CBD to the State Fairgrounds at the border between the city and Oakland County. This subway was just the first segment of a rail line that would have extended underground to 11 Mile Road, then continued above the surface along the Grand Trunk Western Right-of-Way Embankment through Oakland County to Square Lake Road, and would finally terminate as an elevated line in Pontiac. Feeding this central corridor, "fast, effective bus service" would ferry riders to "heated, air conditioned stations... tucked safely" at each node, while parking lots with the capacity for thousands of cars would provide a safe and easy transition between private and public modes. Designed to entice commuters away from those cars, however, the system would boast "sleek, modern trains" with "comfortable seating," modeled after the Washington D.C. Metro's new coaches. Reaching speeds of up to 80 miles per hour, planners estimated the subway would link Detroit's downtown with its northern border at 8 Mile Road in just 13 minutes; fast enough to embarrass any driver who might choose to slog their way through the city's congested freeways. Not only fast, but frequent, trains were scheduled to arrive every 3 minutes during rush hour, every 6 minutes during non-peak periods, and every 10 minutes during evening hours, and continuing less frequently through the night. For such an ambitious system fares ranging from 30 to 80 cents one-way, depending on where one disembarked between the CBD and Pontiac, would make the Woodward line affordable for the vast majority of residents. If plans became reality, Southeast Michigan would have their new system by 1976.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ SEMTA, *Rapid Transit*, 6-10.

Cost estimates for the first segment, from the CBD to the State Fairgrounds totaled \$315 million, or \$78 million per year from 1972 to 1975. Those who might balk at such a steep price tag could be reassured that the “federal government has a special fund specifically for this purpose,” and was expected to cover two-thirds of the cost, or about \$205 million. The plan’s authors cited an “excellent chance” to qualify for these funds, as long as the remaining one-third could be raised among regional and state sources.⁷⁵

Citing a September 22nd *Detroit Free Press* article, the plan emphasized that “the moment of decisive action is at hand. The test of the state’s and the region’s intentions will come over financing, as it almost always does... We say let’s get on with it.” Initial funding would hinge on two proposals currently being debated in the legislature: first, a real-estate transfer tax that would raise \$18 million, and second, an increased gasoline tax, a portion of which would raise \$20 million for public transportation. In all, SEMTA planners estimated these initiatives would cost less than seven dollars per year to individual Southeast Michigan taxpayers, but provide them with one of the most beautiful and efficient rapid transit systems the country had ever seen.⁷⁶

The benefits, the plan stressed, would extend to everyone. Rapid transit would increase land values, provide more revenue for atrophied government coffers, provide jobs for thousands, stimulate business and commerce, keep the downtown vibrant, and even save powerful trucking companies money as congestion decreased. It would allow low-income families access to regional activities, cut down on tardiness to employment or school, allow the elderly to travel safely and quickly, and revitalize run-down areas, officials argued. SEMTA’s planners had emphasized safety and modernity, two essential features for suburbanites who worried about inner-city crime and needed something radical to quit their

⁷⁵ SEMTA, *Rapid Transit*, 16.

⁷⁶ SEMTA, *Rapid Transit*, 17.

cars for public transit. “SEMTA SAYS, THE TIME IS NOW! (sic)” read the final page, with a flourish.⁷⁷ Could the region built by and for the automobile accept a crown jewel that ran on tracks?

Thus, as regional bodies like SEMCOG and SEMTA began to mature and begin the long, arduous work of creating a basis for regional transit development, they confronted a series of barriers that delayed and frustrated the planning process. Though they were able to accomplish planning projects, and even cooperate with local governments in Southeast Michigan, funding to maintain and expand their work was never secure. The volatility of membership, which continued only on a voluntary basis and therefore threatened funding sources and regional cooperation, made planning an unstable process. Lack of adequate funding and support from the state legislature, despite the rhetorical encouragement of Governor Milliken, further blocked agency planning efforts, and handicapped the ability of the organizations responsible for developing a regional transit system to adequately fulfill their respective missions.

4. Deep Structural Barriers

Even as Milliken marshalled his support and SEMTA planned, officials were beginning to understand the sheer power of the structural forces aligned against a regional approach, including in public transportation. In a February 1970 article in the Birmingham publication *The Eccentric*, Metropolitan Fund Chairman Kent Matthewson, also a resident of suburban Bloomfield Hills, echoed the “discoveries” articulated in the Fund’s report. In the face of increasing fragmentation, Matthewson’s declaration that it was “no longer logical to talk about Detroit and its suburbs as separate entities” struck a somewhat ironic tone. Applauding the creation of regional bodies, including SEMCOG and private enterprises like New Detroit, he recommended giving them more authority, but not the taxing powers to

⁷⁷ SEMTA, *Rapid Transit*, 12-19.

reinforce such authority, except for agencies in charge of specific functions, such as mass transit. Quoting State Senator Robert Huber, Matthewson showed how state legislators, though perhaps in favor of stronger regional leadership, denied the need to grant vital taxing powers, and maintained that membership should be strictly voluntary. Thus, apparent acquiescence to regional authority paired with resistance to any real political or financial power it might wield, exemplifies the quiet degradation of the turn towards regionalism. Built on a platform of “civic paranoia,” Matthewson acknowledged the suburban opposition to regional transit specifically. According to the article, the TALUS study, which recommended expanded regional transit and cooperation, caused a “howl” of outrage over “attempts to cram Detroit” solutions down the throats of suburbanites who feared “paying the losses” of Detroit services.⁷⁸

A suburban refusal to support the city from which they grew spelled a dark future, according to governmental reports. The governor’s special Sub-Committee on Regionalism, tasked with evaluating the possibilities of regional cooperation for the years to come, received discouraging information from a September 1971 memo that again recognized the work of private and other organizations dedicated to regional progress, but warned that the city would not be able to respond to its needs alone. Calling for federal assistance, as well as a “larger...more active” role from state officials, the memo went on to document the neglect of Michigan cities that had allowed and impending crisis to develop.

The first crucial element of this neglect was rooted in state congressional reapportionment a decade before, which emphasized land area over population, shifting power from urban centers to rural areas. An issue not only in Michigan, but in many other states during this period, the Supreme Court decreed in its landmark *Baker v. Carr* decision

⁷⁸ Kent Matthewson, “Stronger Role for SEMCOG: Our Problems are Regional- Solutions Must Be Too,” *The Eccentric*, February 12, 1970, Council for Urban Affairs, Box 934, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

that the federal government had the right to rule state apportionment decisions unconstitutional. Despite appeals, Michigan was ordered to revise their districts in the new state constitution, but the debate signaled a shift in state congressional power from urban centers to suburban and rural areas.⁷⁹ The 1960 Census, which partially informed this shift in emphasis, calculated that 70 percent of Americans lived in urban areas, but still qualified fast-growing suburban areas, such as present in Southeast Michigan, as urban. Uniting urban centers and their suburbs as a bloc ignored the contentious relationship between the two, slighting urban interests, while bolstering outstate power over state decision-making. For supporters of more state assistance to localities unable to remedy the “Metropolitan problem,” a reorganization of that essential state power away from urban interests would make regional cooperation more difficult.⁸⁰

A subsidiary of the Sub-Committee on Regionalism, the Special Commission on Local Government was in turn learning the full extent of local financial stress. Some cities could forestall disaster by raising revenues, reports indicated, but not Detroit. Already in “serious” condition, the city had “exhausted the tax resources available to cities under state law, yet continue to incur general fund deficits.” These reports show that even before the battles between Detroit and its suburbs took hold in future decades, officials had already conceded that Detroit was incapable of self-help. After the new Michigan Constitution of 1963 mandated “stronger state controls on local finance” to remedy local fiscal crises, it was clear that state government, having realigned to foment greater opposition to urban interests, would need to take responsibility for its cities, especially Detroit.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Laymond Robinson, “22 States Battle on Redistricting: Fight Spurred by High Court Ruling is Spreading Fast,” *The New York Times*, August 6, 1962, Accessed March 30, 2015.

⁸⁰ Beverly Osman, Memo to the Sub-committee on Regionalism, September 13, 1971, Memorandum Sub-Committee on Regionalism 1971, Box 905, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

⁸¹ Background Paper for Special Commission on Local Government, November 1971, Sub-Committee on Regionalism, Special Commission on Local Government, Box 909, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

To address this growing responsibility of state government in response to local financial crisis, the Subcommittee on Local Government Powers and Functions released its Position Statement on Local Government Powers and Functions in August 1971. First, it reiterated the mounting pressure on local governments, which were left with expensive “social services” programs, despite population losses, and therefore revenue, to the suburbs.⁸²

Critically, however, this process was facilitated by Michigan governmental structure, amounting to what the committee called the “failure of the Grand Design.” A legacy of the Jeffersonian vision for the United States, Michigan governments developed oriented toward the ideal of the primacy of the hyper-local, emphasizing the creation of small, independent townships within a larger state system. The original intent of the Grand Design structure was to use annexation to consolidate political entities as the townships and villages grew. However, the annexations necessary to realize this vision in Southeast Michigan never occurred, exemplified most prominently by Detroit’s blocked attempt to expand its boundaries further during the 1920s.⁸³ This set of policies encouraged the proliferation of local governments with strong home-rule powers, allowing them to resist dissolution into larger, centralized bodies. In Southeast Michigan, this translated to the failure of cities to “adjust sufficiently to changing conditions,” as the social and economic systems that they depended on expanded to surrounding municipalities where they had no jurisdiction.⁸⁴

The report proposed a number of possible approaches to make this system work for the future. Expanding local power even further was deemed unrealistic, as problems exceeded the local scope financially. Establishing regional governments like SEMCOG was

⁸² Subcommittee on Local Government Powers and Functions, “Position Statement on Local Government Powers and Functions,” August 31, 1971, Subcommittee on Regionalism, Special Commission on Local Government, Box 909, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

⁸³ “Michigan’s Problem in Local Government,” Report presented to the Governor by Professor W. Pindur, University of Detroit, September, 1971, Urban Affairs Information, Box 934, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

⁸⁴ Subcommittee on Local Government Powers and Functions, “Position Statement on Local Government Powers and Functions,” August 31, 1971.

discouraged because it would be inefficient to add another jurisdictional layer and would be unpopular. Going on to discourage increased state responsibility, contrasting with the views of Governor Milliken, the report ultimately concluded that no single solution would be correct, but rather a combination of many, and therefore proposed a “network of jurisdictionally exclusive but mutually supportive units of local government.”⁸⁵ Thus, confronted by the immensity of Michigan’s metropolitan crisis, the subcommittee was reduced to hoping for cooperation between governments, rather than concrete policy solutions.

Though Michigan’s problems were unusually dire, similar metropolitan crises had developed nationwide, necessitating federal analysis. Prepared by federal transportation official William Coleman, who was intimately involved with securing federal funding for Southeast Michigan transit projects, the Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations produced “Making Our Federal System Work in the Cities,” hailed as a program to meet “the challenge of the 1970s. This comprehensive document diagnosed the “political and fiscal fragmentation” and “monstrous mismatch of needs and resources” in many metropolitan areas and characterized the course of urban development as “disorderly, destructive,” and “distasteful.” The basis of urban problems, it argued, included “restricted annexation” and “unrestricted incorporation,” “limitation of municipal taxing and borrowing powers,” and the distribution of zoning, land use, and building regulation powers among competing local governments. Citing the hesitancy of state government to take responsibility, as well as the “imbalance of the federal revenue system,” it condemned the role of these two governmental levels in allowing such problems to worsen. Finally, the report placed a portion of blame on “growth in functional government,” meaning power was increasingly held by

⁸⁵ Subcommittee on Local Government Powers and Functions, “Position Statement on Local Government Powers and Functions,” August 31, 1971.

specialists in a certain issue, thereby decreasing the influence of central leaders, such as governors and mayors, leading to inefficiency in policy-making and implementation.⁸⁶ This final point called into question efforts by governors like Milliken to create more agencies, such as the committees, sub-committees, and special agencies tasked with studying and solving Southeast Michigan's crisis.

The following recommendations for "the program for the Seventies" would have been revolutionary for Southeast Michigan. It advocated more power for local governments, including annexation powers and more control over urban functions. Most striking perhaps was its assertion that "state or regional agencies should be empowered to order the dissolution or consolidation of local units of urban government that fail to meet statutory standards of economic, geographic, and political viability."⁸⁷ Southeast Michigan was a perfect example of this failure of viability, so much so that despite the possible efficacy of such sweeping jurisdictional reform, the power that Michigan's condemned system had bestowed upon its competing municipalities would certainly destroy any attempt at such radical change.

As if further confirmation were needed, the Final Report from Michigan's Sub-Committee on Regionalization and Future Development described Southeast Michigan as a "crazy quilt" of overlapping local governments. Capturing the disorganized development that now stood in the way of retroactive policy to stitch the region back together, officials lamented the lack of "regional identity" that was necessary for constituents and their respective governments to cooperate.⁸⁸ Fragmented policy, and in turn fragmented

⁸⁶ William G. Coleman, "Making our Federal System Work in the Cities," The Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations, 1970, Council for Urban Affairs, Box 934, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

⁸⁷ Coleman, "Making our Federal System Work," 1970.

⁸⁸ Final Report from the Sub-Committee on Regionalization and Future Development Policy, the Sub-Committee on Regionalization and Future Development, September 17, 1971, Commission on Local Government (Regionalization and Future Development), Box 905, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

government, led directly to a fragmented citizenry. While planners and state officials explored how to remedy an inefficient and destructive regional system, citizens were left to wonder what this new regional direction meant. In the early 1970s, a council of regional citizens drafted a report to the Sub-Committee on Regionalism in which they asked the fundamental question: “what is a regional citizen?” The novelty of this concept in the minds of Southeast Michigan residents alone illustrates the task ahead of regional planners who not only had to overcome political barriers, but convince millions that they had a responsibility to support those outside their local communities. Though citizens might behave like regional citizens by living, working, or shopping in different communities, they did not think like regional citizens, the report concluded.⁸⁹

Delving deeper into the relationship between regional citizens and the “maze” of jurisdictions that they confronted, University of Detroit Professor W. Pindur highlighted the mismanagement of financial resources within fragmented governments. In general, smaller governments struggled to provide the services that a regional citizen required. More specifically however, Pindur noted a “poorly administered” property tax that failed to generate sufficient revenue from citizens that had little willingness to pay. Furthermore, smaller municipalities, such as those surrounding Detroit, rarely collected much income tax revenue, and townships generated even less revenue.⁹⁰ In addition to indicating how financially attractive outlying communities could be, Pindur’s analysis emphasized the consequences of Michigan’s complicated governmental structure, which pinched off revenue streams that might serve useful, and also fomented a lack of citizen responsibility for the state of surrounding areas. According to Ben Holman, the Director of Community Relations

⁸⁹ Draft- Regional Citizens Presentation to Sub-Committee on Regionalism, No date (Early 1970s), Sub-Committee on Regionalism- Special Commission on Local Government, Box 909, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

⁹⁰ “Michigan’s Problem in Local Government,” Report presented to the Governor by Professor W. Pindur, University of Detroit, September, 1971, Urban Affairs Information, Box 934, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

Service in the U.S. Department of Justice, the “crazy quilt” of political jurisdictions was also one of “highly impermeable boundaries,” that required “far-reaching changes in the ideology of the general majority” in order to overcome them.⁹¹

5. Planning Persistence

Despite the growing knowledge in planning and government circles that nothing short of regional unification of governments and citizens would save drowning municipalities like Detroit, government planning agencies continued to develop their ideas for the region. Following the release of its first major planning effort, limited to development of a Woodward Avenue subway and corresponding feeder systems, SEMTA continued to forge a new vision for regional transit. During the first few years of the 1970s, the agency acquired and improved transit lines, both in the suburbs and the city, adding over 150 new buses to circulation. Small-bus commuter services for regional employment were implemented. Most importantly, expanded plans for a regional network, not only along Woodward, but six major corridors that began in Detroit and fanned out to the rest of the region, were making progress. A larger Bus Improvement Plan would be initiated “as funds [became] available,” and the development of innovative transit solutions such as busways were planned for the future as well.⁹²

Without the power to levy taxes, and severely limited revenue from fare-boxes and service fees, SEMTA survived almost solely on government grants or private donations. Though not nearly sufficient to solve its budget problems, the passage of elements of Governor Milliken’s transportation package, consisting of hikes in the statewide gasoline tax, allowed for expanded planning and implementation funds, and engendered optimism for

⁹¹ Remarks of Ben Holman, Director of Community Relations Service, U.S. Department of Justice, November 21, 1969, Urban Affairs Information, Box 934, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

⁹² SEMTA Fact Sheet, SEMTA, October 1973, Transportation, Box 915, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

future revenue sources. Federal government assistance also proved vital, especially in the infrastructure improvements that SEMTA had made, and grant proposals to Washington for future capital projects were being prepared.⁹³

As 1974 began, this measured progress was sparking an increase in political and media attention to regional transit. Reception varied widely, and doubts about the possible success of regional efforts were shared widely. As the *Detroit Free Press* noted, rapid transit was not a new subject, and the many studies and plans over the years had not yet produced anything concrete. One thing supporters could agree on was the need for political will to convert plans into reality. An unexpected ally in creating that political will was the ongoing energy crisis that dominated this period in the U.S. With gas prices ranging from 60 cents to a dollar per gallon- expensive for this era- more and more consumers were leaving their cars for public transit.⁹⁴ One article speculated that residents might “say goodbye to their love affair with cars,”⁹⁵ as mass transit usage in Southeast Michigan was hitting record numbers, including a 9 percent increase in SEMTA communities.⁹⁶ Governor Milliken’s “courageous” efforts to pass the gas tax increase several months before initially met “howls of dismay” from legislators, but recently those same legislators were appealing for their own local transit funding. A number of media sources in support of regional transit plans seemed to unite around an ultimatum to policy-makers: most other metropolitan areas were taking advantage of the moment, so politicians should stop bickering and get it done.⁹⁷

⁹³ SEMTA Fact Sheet, SEMTA, October 1973.

⁹⁴ David Cooper, “Focus on SEMTA: Transit Issue Gets Political Attention,” *Detroit Free Press*, 1974, Folder 106.11- Subject Files- Mass Transit, Box 106, Coleman A. Young Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

⁹⁵ “As We See It: Transit Plan Shows Need for Political Leadership,” *Detroit Free Press*, March 22, 1974, Folder 106.11- Subject Files- Mass Transit, Box 106, Coleman A. Young Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

⁹⁶ Hugh McCann, “Use of Mass Transit Picking Up, but Will it Last?,” *Detroit Free Press*, April 29, 1974, Folder 106.11- Subject Files- Mass Transit, Box 106, Coleman A. Young Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

⁹⁷ David Cooper, “Focus on SEMTA: Transit Issue Gets Political Attention,” *Detroit Free Press*, 1974.

Though such media rhetoric reduced disagreements over regional transit to petty bickering, resistance to finally implementing transit proposals was fed by important points of contention. As reported in the *Detroit News*, the expanded rapid transit plan that SEMTA had recently proposed came with a price tag of \$2.4 billion. While President Nixon's administration had made federal funding available to finance up to 80 percent of capital projects for public transportation, opposition to exploitation of the federal Highway Trust Fund for such funding was led by Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler, in partnership with the political might of the highway lobby. So intimidating was this coalition that SEMTA General Manager Lipscomb conceded that he would seek funding from a separate mass transit fund, rather than go to battle over the Highway Trust Fund money.⁹⁸ For much of the region, this separation between highway infrastructure and public transit was crucial, as issues regarding regional transportation were historically synonymous with highways. The divide between highway and public transit would also have important implications for federal funding, as highway projects benefitted from a 90 percent commitment of federal funds, while public transit would receive only an 80 percent commitment.⁹⁹

Constituents were also reported to voice concerns that a shift in priorities from automobile infrastructure to public transit would hurt the auto industry, and therefore their livelihoods. According to SEMTA Board Chairman Marshall, this claim was false, however, because the auto interests, including Michigan United Auto Workers president Leonard Woodcock, chose not to "vigorously" oppose the plan in state government debates.¹⁰⁰ While Lynn Townsend, the board chairperson for Chrysler, reiterated that her company would not

⁹⁸ Howard Warren, "Big 3 Oppose Shift of Road Funds to Mass Transit," *Detroit News*, March 30, 1974, Folder 106.11- Subject Files- Mass Transit, Box 106, Coleman A. Young Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

⁹⁹ Howard Warren, "New U.S. Funds are Urged for Mass Transit, Highways," *Detroit Free Press*, April 1974, Folder 106.11- Subject Files- Mass Transit, Box 106, Coleman A. Young Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

¹⁰⁰ No Author Given, "What the SEMTA Plan would Mean for Michigan," *Detroit Free Press*, March 29, 1974, Folder 106.11- Subject Files- Mass Transit, Box 106, Coleman A. Young Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

stand in the way of public transit efforts, she cautioned that extensive transit projects like the one proposed might bankrupt struggling cities, emphasizing that motor vehicles were still the most cost effective and socially beneficial mode of transit available.¹⁰¹

6. Controversy and Critique

Coinciding with public transit discussions during this period was the controversial debate over desegregating regional school districts through busing. According to State Aid Act 307 of 1969, the state refused to subsidize the transportation of students across political boundary lines.¹⁰² The effect of demographic distribution in the region, forwarded by this policy, caused the NAACP to file a lawsuit based on the desegregation precedent established by *Brown v. Board* in 1954. Agreeing with the NAACP's charge that confining students to their home districts amounted to de jure segregation, Judge Stephen Roth's decision called on state government to subsidize a desegregation plan for Detroit schools. In response, the state legislature,¹⁰³ determined to prohibit such an infiltration of Detroit students, who were mostly black, proposed a constitutional amendment to reinforce the state's stance against "the busing of students or the dissolution of the neighborhood school."¹⁰⁴ Such use of local rights to fight transportation of populations across the region's political boundaries, and its direct relationship to state government policy connected this issue inextricably with other mass transit proposals. In fact, the idea that the two policies were related compelled legislators in support of the mass transit proposals to officially clarify how unrelated they were.¹⁰⁵ Debate over busing continued until the landmark 1974 Supreme Court decision in *Milliken v. Bradley*

¹⁰¹ Warren, "New U.S. Funds are Urged," April, 1974.

¹⁰² Michigan State Aid for School Transportation, Summary by the Michigan Civil Rights Commission, November, 1971, Civil Rights Commission- Busing, Box 905, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹⁰³ Letter from Hughes to Milliken, 1971, Civil Rights Commission- Busing, Box 905, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹⁰⁴ Letter from Civil Rights Commission to Milliken, October 21, 1971, Civil Rights Commission- Busing, Box 905, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹⁰⁵ Letter from Kenneth Frankland (legal counsel) to Senator Pursell, April 11, 1972, Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority (SEMTA), Box 697, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

overturned Roth's ruling, removing the requirement for state busing to alleviate school segregation. A victory for the forces of division between Southeast Michigan communities, the perceived association between busing and mass transit added unnecessary negative attention to the policies proposed by Milliken and SEMTA, delaying their progress in the legislature and facilitating anti-public transit sentiment among legislators and citizens alike.

Within this contentious political atmosphere, neither the most glowing endorsements of transit plans, nor calls from media supporters for easy passage of funding proposals, would suffice to foment widespread political will in favor of regional transit efforts. State legislative support, without which any comprehensive regional transit project was impossible, now depended increasingly on outstate interests, thanks in large part to the reorganization of political power weighted toward non-urban areas. The raised profile of such comprehensive regional transit reform brought transit debates to distant parts of the state, whose leaders now wielded a larger portion of decision-making power. Without large metropolitan centers like Detroit that might grant urban policy more importance, these disparate communities tended to side with anti-transit interests, as they saw little benefit for themselves in funding infrastructure plans for far-away regions.

In response to Governor Milliken's proposal to fund general transportation projects statewide with a \$1.1 billion bond issue, a 1974 article in the *Big Rapids Pioneer*, a town over 200 miles from Detroit, warned its voters that there was "more to this than meets the eye." Lumping "metropolitan" citizens and legislators into an "urban" bloc in favor of Milliken's plan, the article sought to expose the real agenda of the plan: subsidizing transit for "urban" Southeast Michigan at the expense of outstaters. Though conceding that the Detroit region "contains more than half of the state's population," it seriously questioned the notion that this was "where \$450 MILLION (sic) is needed the most." If only 16 percent of the funds would go to supporting rural areas, "do we really know HOW (sic) they will benefit?" the article

posited.¹⁰⁶ In this way, many outstate media outlets framed regional transit funding efforts as a suspicious joint operation between state officials and metropolitan areas to squeeze money out of the rest of the state. Milliken's administration pointed out that many outstate interests had also expressed support for the bond issue, but recognized the need to further convince rural Michiganders of the plan's state-wide benefits.¹⁰⁷ In any case, assumptions such as these could prove costly in legislative funding battles that required unified state support.

¹⁰⁶ No Author Given, "Transportation Bill Favors Large Cities," *Big Rapids Pioneer*, June 18, 1974, Transportation 1980, Box 844, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹⁰⁷ Memo George Weeks to Mark Mason, June 27, 1974, Transportation 1980, Box 844, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

III. Detroit and a Rising Coalition

1. Inter-Governmental Relations

If Southeast Michigan was experiencing a crisis of local government, exacerbated by regional fragmentation, the defining example was Detroit. Despite massive amounts of debt—\$21 million by 1970, Detroit residents endured the highest property taxes in Michigan, and in many cases paid more than twice as much income tax as suburban residents. A majority black city by the early 1970s, whites continued their exodus to the suburbs in earnest, further undercutting the financial resources of the city. A vicious cycle had been developing, wherein declining revenues, and therefore services, caused by the flight of thousands of white Detroiters, subsequently contributed to the fear of crime, associated with the increasing blackness and poverty of the central city. Declining revenue translated to a decline in city services, such as public schools, making the lower taxes, increased job opportunities, and more affordable property values of suburbia irresistible for those who left.¹⁰⁸ As indicated by report after report, Detroit's situation was irreversible without substantial assistance from state and federal sources.

Potentially even more problematic for regional transit efforts was the relationship between Detroit and the rest of the region. One big reason for optimism was the emerging alliance between Governor Milliken and Detroit Mayor Coleman Young, who took office in 1974. Detroit's first black Mayor, Young was the political heir of a profound demographic shift wrought by the suburbanization process. Vacated by hundreds of thousands of whites, Detroit became a majority black city in the early 1970s, translating to a seizing of the city's political institutions, including the mayoralty, by African American voters and candidates.¹⁰⁹ As the *Free Press* reported, Young and Milliken were united in their commitment to

¹⁰⁸ Memo regarding state and local fiscal relationships, March 24, 1970, Council for Urban Affairs, Box 934, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹⁰⁹ Farley, *Detroit Divided*, 47.

reversing the city's decline, and both saw public transit as essential to accomplishing their goals. Despite an amiable relationship between state and city executives, however, repairing the "huge mistrust on both sides," following the long history of state neglect and social conflict within the city, would require gargantuan efforts.¹¹⁰

Progress was off to a decidedly slow start. In early 1974, SEMTA required Detroit Common Council approval for federal funds to bring 200 buses to Southeast Michigan, 150 of which might supplement the DSR's fleet. However, the article reports it was blocked by one city employee union, indicating the hesitancy of many outside of the mayor's office to cooperate with an agency outside of the city.¹¹¹ In April, SEMTA brought the larger \$2.4 billion plan before the city council for approval, but despite the benefits that planners had envisioned for the city, some council members were less than enthusiastic. Councilwoman Erma Henderson argued that Detroit should forego cooperation with a larger regional agency and apply directly to the federal government for assistance. Federal money was available, but perhaps not for long as other cities in need of assistance, such as Atlanta, had been taking advantage of the funds. There was a reason Detroit had only received one-fifth of the funding Atlanta had received up to this point: it required regional and state approval. Councilwoman Maryann Mahaffey was legitimately concerned that the SEMTA plan was not enough for those without cars. Finally, council president Carl Levin wondered why cheaper rubber tired trains, as opposed to standard rail, would not be a better option. He seemed to misunderstand SEMTA's arguments for rail based not only on long-term cost, which favored rail, but harsh Michigan winter conditions, which would impede tires, but not fixed rail.¹¹² Evidently, not

¹¹⁰No Author Given, "As We See It: City, SEMTA Must Stop Petty Political Quibbling," *Detroit Free Press*, March 4, 1974, 106.11, Subject Files-Mass Transit, Coleman A. Young Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

¹¹¹"City, SEMTA Must Stop," March 4, 1974.

¹¹²No Author Given, "SEMTA's Rapid Transit Plan: Evaluation Needed," No Source (*Detroit Free Press*), April 4, 1974, 106.11, Subject Files-Mass Transit, Coleman A. Young Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

only did Detroit leaders have their own plans that diverged from SEMTA's, but there was a troubling lack of information-sharing between the two entities, leading to a slow and disjointed working relationship.

2. Continued Efforts Mid-Decade

Nevertheless, as the 1970s reached their mid-point, Governor Milliken persisted with his vision for regional transit. In the spring of 1975, he issued a special message on transportation in Southeast Michigan. Milliken lamented the years of “frustration” and “delay” that clouded his first few years in office, but struck back with optimism, hinting that a breakthrough was imminent on his transit package, and proclaiming a preliminary commitment of over \$500 million from the federal government to put towards the development of regional transit in the maligned region.¹¹³

The “Unified Transit Program” he put forward to the Michigan legislature now resembled a mature and comprehensive system. Aided by the promise of substantial federal funds, the skeleton of the network would consist of a “high-level system” that radiated out from Detroit’s Central Business District along 3 main corridors. Linking key destinations throughout the region, this essential piece could be completed by 1981. Operating around and feeding the main corridors, a bus rapid transit system would amplify the power of the new system to ferry residents throughout Detroit and her surroundings, while enhanced commuter rail lines would facilitate movement into and out of the region’s epicenter like never before. Finally, a “People Mover” in the heart of Detroit would streamline movement within the CBD, reducing congestion in the heart of the city and symbolize a new, lucrative Detroit, while small commuter buses traversed the city’s boundaries, making regional employment more accessible for Detroiters. In addition to promising these infrastructure improvements,

¹¹³ Draft of proposed message from Governor on transportation in Southeast Michigan, delivered on April 16, 1975, April 15, 1975, Transportation- Southeast Michigan, Box 769, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

Milliken intended to restructure operating agency appointments, proposing five appointees from SEMCOG, five from the mayor of Detroit, and three from the Governor, attempting to strike a balance between the interests of city and suburb.¹¹⁴

Though Milliken's plan seemed comprehensive, as well as responsive to the increasing transit needs of Detroit, Mayor Coleman Young had been busy developing his own plans for revitalizing the city. Confronted by the mounting financial crisis in his city, the mayor looked to the federal government for the assistance he needed. In March 1974, the mayor addressed U.S. senators on the Committee of Public Works and Subcommittee on Transportation in downtown Detroit, eloquently stating his case for substantial federal funding. At the national level, subsidizing urban transit systems was challenged by critics who feared funding "inefficient, deteriorating transit systems" that amounted to a "bottomless pit" of urban financial problems. Such sentiments from detractors contributed to the defeat of an urban transit operation subsidy bill and a freeze on distribution of federal funds for capital transit projects, which Young lamented in his speech. He countered, breaking down the operating deficit presently facing the city's transportation system, which required substantial state subsidies through SEMTA, which still proved woefully inadequate. This was in turn draining the city's general fund, which contributed to transit operations as well, multiplying needs even further. Citing the work being done by SEMTA to plan for the region's transit needs, Young implored congress not to let it "gather dust on the bookshelf," and guarantee federal funds necessary for implementation.¹¹⁵

As well as the work being done by SEMTA, the mayor was crafting his own solutions to the region's transit problems. Titled "Moving Detroit Forward," and endorsed by the Mayor's signature in 1975, Young's plan proposed solutions for a number of urban

¹¹⁴ Draft of proposed message, April 15, 1975.

¹¹⁵ Transportation Planning and Priorities for the Seventies (Detroit, MI), a hearing before the Subcommittee on Transportation of the Committee on Public Works, United States Senate, March 29, 1974, pg. 2-7, Accessed March 27, 2015.

deficiencies, including a regional transit plan that endorsed SEMTA's recommendations for rapid transit along key corridors, as well as improved commuter rail service to connect Detroit with the rest of the region. A modern inter-modal terminal would not only facilitate movement between the now varied transit modes available to Detroiters, but provide another symbol of the city's infrastructure revolution as an impressive new urban landmark. The centerpiece of the Mayor's plan, however, was the CBD People Mover, designed to consummate the futuristic renaissance of the city as it ferried riders around the Detroit skyline.¹¹⁶

As part of the advent of federal funding for urban public transit over the past decade, people movers had become an item of high demand among city planners. Designed to combat "the tide of choking automobiles in downtown areas," the federal government made a large pot of money available for these automatic downtown circulators.¹¹⁷ Mayors like Coleman Young were especially attracted to them not only to improve movement within the economic cores of their cities, but because their distinctive modern design had the potential to drastically increase the attractiveness of their most vital areas. Furthermore, they represented perhaps the best chance to bring federal funding to their CBD's, resulting in an impressive injection of infrastructure at minimal local cost. Indeed, a 1972 federal report to the Michigan legislature showed a "deluge" of requests from cities to support people mover projects.¹¹⁸ One of many competing cities across the country, Detroit officials, including Young, would do whatever they could to take advantage of such an attractive opportunity.

¹¹⁶ Moving Detroit Forward: A Plan for Urban Economic Revitalization, 1975, Moving Detroit Forward- 1975, Box 913, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹¹⁷ Ernest Holsendolph, "4 Cities Will Get \$220 Million for 'People Movers,'" *New York Times*, December 23, 1976, Accessed March 27, 2015.

¹¹⁸ Interim report to the legislature from the Bureau of Transportation, Dept. of Commerce, November 1972, 16-2 Transportation Systems Report 1972, Box 16, Coleman A. Young Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

Following evaluation and endorsement from the New Detroit Committee, the transportation improvements were estimated to require just over \$611 million from the federal government, while the state would contribute another \$74 million. In return, the transportation plan predicted the creation of thousands of metropolitan jobs, and a desperately needed influx of tax revenue for the city, among a slate of economic benefits.¹¹⁹ Of the six economic areas the plan addressed, transportation improvements were especially important. Planners emphasized the particular difficulties the city confronted, not limited to the effects of sprawl, exacerbated by a widespread energy crisis. According to reports, 28 percent of Detroiters, and 50 percent who lived within twelve square miles of the city center had no car available, demonstrating the profound need for alternative modes to access employment and other opportunities outside the city.¹²⁰ In response, this first major transit effort of the Young administration asserted the interests of Detroit in the development of regional transit, with a specific focus toward revitalizing the center of the city. Including the recommendations of SEMTA, Detroit officials seemed to indicate their commitment to help their city through recognition of a regional approach, but extensive work remained to create the coalition needed to join the city's plans with the rest of the region.

3. Lingering Tensions and Considered Alternatives

Still, it would be difficult for many Detroit officials to relinquish the history of mistrust of the rest of the region, and with the availability of federal funds, direct aid to the city seemed a tantalizing option. Appealing directly to fellow Michigander and current president Gerald Ford, Young asserted in a 1975 letter that Detroit was perhaps the city hardest hit by the economic recession sweeping through the country, and therefore should be first in line for any federal assistance. Leveraging the proactive work done in his "Moving

¹¹⁹ Mayor's plan for Moving Detroit Forward, 1975, New Detroit Files, Box 913, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹²⁰ Moving Detroit Forward Summary, No Date Given, 103.5: Reports Moving Detroit Forward, Box 103, Coleman A. Young Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

Detroit Forward” plan, the mayor urged the president become his partner in the herculean effort to revitalize the city.¹²¹ Ford appeared to respond decisively to the mayor’s offer, indicating a possible commitment of almost \$800 million, \$600 million of which was intended for mass transit capital projects.¹²²

Thus, Mayor Young’s first years in office appeared to contain notes of genuine progress in terms of planning for the future of the city and securing the funding necessary to implement them. The language of the Moving Detroit Forward plan positioned him as the keystone in a rising coalition of business, labor, and government leaders in the metropolitan area. Answering a the common accusation from many outstate leaders, his administration proclaimed that Detroit’s “problems have not been caused by local mismanagement, but by national economic trends aggravated by Federal neglect and policies which have favored the suburbs at the expense of the city.”¹²³ City leaders therefore looked mainly to the federal government to atone for such neglect. Though initial promises from Ford’s administration, picking up where the previous administration had left off, seemed to be forthcoming, city officials would underestimate the necessary role of the region, and of state government at their peril. Contingent on supplementary funds from the state legislature, federal funding for comprehensive regional transit would have to negotiate the remaining gulfs between regional decision-makers, meaning Young would not be able to fix his city alone.

State officials were indeed struggling to piece together the broader coalition necessary for Detroit’s plans to succeed. As communicated to Milliken by Bill Long, his top transportation aide, a tri-partite agreement between Detroit, SEMTA, and the state was experiencing “slow progress.” Opposition was rising from suburban interests, such as

¹²¹ Coleman Young, Letter to President Gerald Ford, April 30, 1975, 103.5: Reports Moving Detroit Forward, Box 103, Coleman A. Young Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

¹²² Executive summary of 6th draft of Moving Detroit Forward, 1977, 103.6: Reports Moving Detroit Forward, 1977, Box 103, Coleman A. Young Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

¹²³ Executive summary of 6th draft, 1977.

Oakland County, which still refused to wholly endorse regional transportation plans, and was delaying the process by holding out for alternatives to SEMTA's proposals, which posed a credible threat to the entire effort. Furthermore, policy-makers in Detroit were not all aligned with the mayor. Asserting that Young did not have the power to make any agreements without the consent of the people, through their elected representatives on the Council, those that stood to benefit the most from regional and state plans remained suspicious, delaying the process further.¹²⁴

Clearly, as the latter half of the 1970s approached, regional transit proposals seemed to be making progress in key areas. Leaders at the federal, state, regional, and even the local level made great strides to lay the groundwork for a comprehensive system, including massive funding commitments, but still the regional cooperation necessary for implementation eluded transit advocates. As the decade passed into its final stages, it was unclear how sustainable the preliminary momentum would be, while hundreds of thousands of Southeast Michigan residents languished without the mobility they required.

4. Federal Support for Southeast Michigan Transit

Back in 1971, the first SEMTA plan for rapid transit along Woodward Avenue speculated that the project could be completed by 1976. As that year came and went, Southeast Michigan was still locked in the planning and funding phase, utterly unable to achieve concrete progress in creating the regional consensus necessary to begin constructing a comprehensive system. Meanwhile, Detroit sank deeper into its chronic economic crisis. Reports revealed that officials "faced the real possibility of bankruptcy" in 1975 and the budget deficit for the next fiscal year reached \$100 million. Numbers from the 1976-77 fiscal year showed a reduced deficit, but at substantial cost, as the city shed employees and reduced

¹²⁴ Memo from Bill Long to Governor Milliken, July 18, 1975, Transportation- Southeast Michigan, Box 769, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

services, while taxing its residents even more. In the wake of the energy crisis, adult unemployment reached an estimated 25 percent, and over 100,000 Detroiters were out of work even as the city's population continued to decline, as those who could afford it left in droves.¹²⁵

The 1976 Democratic campaign for president, and its candidate, Jimmy Carter, pledged to honor promises to support cities financially. According to Detroit officials, of the almost \$800 million Gerald Ford had committed to Detroit, about \$200 million had been transferred. Put to use on projects such as the Renaissance Center, the city claimed it had converted this investment into billions of dollars' worth of progress, and planned to receive \$2.8 billion more from Washington to remedy the crisis. Supplemented by substantial private investment from developers still keen to support their interests in the central city, officials remained hopeful that the influx of cash could reverse the economic tailspin.¹²⁶

In terms of transit, the federal Urban Mass Transit Agency had indeed committed \$600 million to rapid transit, but in order to receive this vast sum, the region had to unite behind one type of system, and the state had to raise matching funds equal to 20 percent of those promised by the federal government. According to reports, SEMTA, Detroit, SEMCOG, and the state were involved in selecting the best system. Based on results from the Transit Alternatives Economic Impact Analysis, SEMTA asserted that light rail was still the best option for the region, estimating the total cost of implementation at just under \$1.5 billion.¹²⁷ Political leadership, including Milliken, Young, Detroit Councilman Levin, and even a few representatives from suburban government seemed to share a common goal when it came to federal money. Inter-office correspondence shows how this select group lobbied for support from now president Jimmy Carter, both through telephone calls and a June 1977

¹²⁵ Executive summary of 6th draft, 1977.

¹²⁶ Executive summary of 6th draft, 1977.

¹²⁷ Transportation Program for Revitalization, 1977, 103.7- Reports Moving Detroit Forward 1977, Box103, Coleman A. Young Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

meeting, during which Milliken stressed the state's support for transit plans like Young's Moving Detroit Forward.¹²⁸ In addition to lobbying for more funds from the federal government, state legislation to raise the necessary funds included higher vehicle licensing and title transfer taxes within Southeast Michigan, and a \$150 million bond issue to support all transit modes. The race to make regional transit a reality in the 1980s was on.¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Memo for telephone calls for Moving Detroit Forward, June 7, 1977, 103.6 Reports Moving Detroit Forward 1977, Box 103, Coleman A. Young Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

¹²⁹ Transportation Program for Revitalization, 1977.

IV. The End of the Line

1. The State Debates Transit Support

In the midst of worsening urban crisis, regional decision-makers would need to finally unite in support of regional transit. However, meetings between leaders to discuss the issue continued to exemplify the inability of various interests to reach such necessary consensus. As Bill Long reported to the Governor, meetings with Mayor Young and SEMTA representatives continued to stall over divisions between local interests. Disconnected from the economic plight of Detroit, suburban SEMTA members were reluctant to continue pressing the federal government for increased funding, clashing with Mayor Young's vision for Detroit's way forward. A 1977 federal budget report showed that "Detroit [had] received a commitment in principle for a new system," but still needed to decide on a mode in order to bring in federal funds.

Discussions over another vital aspect of regional transit development, a merger between SEMTA and Detroit's transit system, renamed the Detroit Department of Transportation (D-DOT) in 1974, in turn provoked opposition from Young, who mistrusted placing the fate of the city's transit in the hands of regional, or suburban, interests. He would approve the merger, he asserted, as long as he was guaranteed the People Mover, which he envisioned as a beacon for the city's revitalization, as well as the cornerstone of regional transit centered in Detroit's CBD. Frustratingly, suburban SEMTA members could not allow such a commitment to Detroit infrastructure until they had their own guarantees for incremental transit infrastructure improvements in their respective localities.¹³⁰

Troubling signs also surfaced at the introduction of Milliken's transportation proposals, dubbed the "transportation package," which was intended to generate more

¹³⁰ Memo from Bill Long to Governor Milliken, October 24, 1977, Transportation- Southeast Michigan, Box 769, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

revenue from gasoline, diesel, and weight taxes totaling almost \$150 million.¹³¹ According to a summary news report circulated among Republican legislators, though many agreed that Michigan could use improved transit infrastructure, battle lines were being drawn as to how. Regional transit for the Detroit area was covered in the language of the proposal by phrases such as “equipment for metropolitan transit systems.” Though the proposed funding measure was intended to provide benefits outside of mass transit, such as road and highway repair, many lawmakers were already expressing their distaste for more tax increases, especially in outstate areas. Many Democrats thought the \$144 million revenue increase was too little, while one opponent was quoted to declare the “the plan is about as popular as rattlesnakes in my district.” One article in the *Holland Sentinel* claimed to see through the ploy by Milliken and his Democratic allies in the Michigan House who proposed it. “Despite the promises” to outstate areas, it cautioned, “we can see most of the money being funneled into the Detroit area mass transit systems.” Citing Milliken’s desire to win Detroit in the upcoming gubernatorial election, it accused the governor of reviving “the same old story” of “our money...constantly going to help the Detroit area.”¹³²

Here, even in the face of modest transit improvements, the legislature remained stubbornly hesitant, meaning obtaining the state funds necessary to receive the massive federal package was increasingly difficult. Solidifying their resistance as each year passed, suburban constituents voiced their concerns regarding Milliken’s efforts to integrate city and suburb. Shockingly, the views of many were not so different from the outstate lawmaker’s comments likening the transit plan to rattlesnakes, as one outraged citizen from Warren feared that she and her fellow suburbanites would be “murdered in our beds,” as the city

¹³¹ Overview: Transportation Package, No Date Given (most likely 1978), Transportation 1978, Box 844, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹³² No Author Given, “Transit Package,” *Evening Sentinel* (Holland, MI), March 10, 1978, Transportation 1978, Box 844, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

encroached upon their communities.¹³³ Following a familiar tune, outstate residents urged their representatives to block attempts to make them subsidize the welfare of a corrupt, deceitful, and even dangerous city.

As 1978 began, Milliken stood firm in his support for his transportation package, naming it his “highest priority.” In a February address to the state legislature, the governor explained that there was a general “misunderstanding” that “this is solely an urban mass transit proposal for southeast Michigan,” which many had taken to calling the “mass transit package.” Milliken continued to detail the various other functions of the revenue collected, such as more politically popular purposes like road improvements, dial-a-ride services for seniors, and railroad repair to stimulate business. “That is not urban mass transit,” the governor intoned after each of these points, taking each opportunity to distance the package from any mention of expanded public transportation in Southeast Michigan.¹³⁴ Clearly, if garnering political support for the measure required the rhetorical gymnastics to disassociate it with public transit in the same breath, the issue was a political non-starter.

Because the revenue from the transportation package was to be accomplished through tax increases, it made the proposal especially unfavorable. Time was running out, cut short by a tax limitation amendment which both Milliken and his gubernatorial challenger had endorsed. Though passing an unpopular package in an atmosphere of support for tax limitation was a tall order, supporters urged Milliken, and his ally State Representative Ryan to “work [their] magic,” and get it passed.¹³⁵ Though “only six to eight senators” were “definitely in favor of the package,” Ryan expressed his own optimism in a legislative news

¹³³ Letter from Mrs. Stiefvater to Milliken, January 5, 1977, Complaints, Box 927, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹³⁴ Executive office memo, February 7, 1978, Transportation 1978, Box 844, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹³⁵ No Author Given, “In Our Opinion: Get It Moving,” *Detroit Free Press*, August 8, 1978, Transportation 1978, Box 844, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

report, citing backing from “diverse groups, including governmental, transportation, business, and community associations.”¹³⁶

In late September, “last-ditch”¹³⁷ efforts by the package’s supporters saw Milliken sign three bills into law. HB 4407 raised fuel taxes by two cents per gallon, HB 4405 raised personal vehicle registration fees, and HB 5654 devoted \$21 million in sales tax revenue to a comprehensive transportation fund, from which it could fund urban mass transit projects.¹³⁸ Celebrations for achieving this marginal support for transit was short-lived, however, as reactions were “swift and vehement.” Vicious attacks were leveled at Milliken specifically, who outstate voters threatened to throw out of office because of his continued stance in support of such measures to support urban transit.¹³⁹ In the face of such backlash, the legislative triumph may have done more to rile outstate opponents than to accomplish its goal of funding regional transit systems.

2. Negotiating the Region

Elsewhere on the transit battlefield, negotiations between Detroit and suburban SEMTA members seemed to make real progress. A deal had been reached between Mayor Young and Oakland County executive Daniel Murphy based on a seven point program to resolve their differences. Tensions had peaked when Oakland County threatened to withdraw from SEMTA, which Milliken reflected “would be disaster for our hopes to achieve a comprehensive transportation program for Michigan.” Realizing the importance of Oakland County’s role in achieving the regional transit which Detroit so desperately needed, both Milliken and Young acquiesced to the demands of the County. The part of the agreement

¹³⁶ Michigan Report No. 152, Vol. 17: “Plans Drawn for Last Push to Pass Transportation Package,” Congwer News Service, Inc., August 10, 1978, Transportation 1978, Box 844, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹³⁷ Michigan Report No. 152, Vol. 17: “Plans Drawn for Last Push to Pass Transportation Package,” 1978.

¹³⁸ Executive office memo, October 21, 1978, Transportation 1978, Box 844, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹³⁹ No Author Given, “Outstate Voters Outraged,” *Lapeer County Press*, October 4, 1978, Transportation 1978, Box 844, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

which required all parties to support the recommendations of SEMTA's regional vision would have left the Mayor dissatisfied, as it would mean handing more of Detroit's control to the rest of the region, and might jeopardize his grand plan for the People Mover.

Furthermore, Young was forced to agree to lend his support to implementing a small bus program for Oakland County, taking the focus away from Detroit's dire need in order to assuage interests of suburban communities.¹⁴⁰ Thus, while the agreement represented compromise, and kept hopes for a regional system alive, Oakland County had demonstrated the power it wielded. Holding the city hostage in exchange for improvements that predominantly benefitted its local communities, the county leveraged its integral role to further delay the programs that would aid the city.

Young's payoff would come months later, as the compromise undoubtedly led to a federal UMTA commitment of \$950,000 to finance preliminary work on the People Mover. After 15 to 18 months of study, actual construction was slated to begin in about two years, finally bringing the symbol Young desired for his CBD to Detroit after a four-year process. For Milliken, the commitment was "a first step toward better integration of all transportation services in southeast Michigan," and combined with the transportation package, would "open exciting new public transportation options for urban and suburban residents of the SEMTA region." To be managed by SEMTA, the development of the People Mover would still be subject to further regional negotiations, but transit supporters must have been lifted by such concrete action.¹⁴¹

According to its 1978 annual report, SEMTA too seemed optimistic. Board Chairman Tom Turner wrote that ridership for both bus and commuter rail was on the rise, while General Manager Larry Salci cited progress on planning for the regional system, reduced

¹⁴⁰ Executive Office Memo, April 14, 1978, Transportation 1978, Box 844, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹⁴¹ Executive Office Memo, June 12, 1978, Transportation 1978, Box 844, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

fares for 50 percent of riders, and improved route rationalization as encouraging improvements despite a “steep mountain climb” ahead. The report continued to detail service improvements, deficit elimination, and the People Mover as positive developments during the past year. A two and a half year study yielded six alternative regional systems, one of which would become Southeast Michigan’s answer to regional transit after final deliberations in the near future. Troublingly, however, funding breakdowns indicated that over half of SEMTA’s budget came from federal grants, while another third came from Michigan, putting the agency in a precarious situation.¹⁴² It was late, but regional transit was not dead yet.

3. A Light at the End?

As 1979 began, officials seemed to sense an impending breakthrough. An April briefing paper prepared by the Michigan Department of Transportation and the Bureau of Urban and Public Transportation, attention was directed to a March *Detroit News* article that summarized the situation. According to the article, agreement between interests on the SEMTA board ceased at the issue of linking the urban and suburban systems, putting Woodward Avenue in the spotlight. Young still championed a subway as the best option, but suburban opposition refused to abide granting the city the best part of the deal, instead proposing bus transit that would provide more circulation through suburban communities. Ultimately, the article advised against regional transit without a subway, as it would greatly benefit the city and its surrounding communities in turn. Rail would also cost less to operate, despite higher initial capital costs.¹⁴³

On April 3rd, 1979, SEMTA’s Board of Directors reached a decision. Dubbed the

¹⁴² SEMTA Annual Report, 1978, SEMTA, Box 933, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹⁴³ No Author Given, “The Subway Issue,” March 29, 1979, *The Detroit News*, in Briefing Paper: Proposed Regional transit System for Southeastern Michigan, April 10, 1979, SEMTA, Box 933, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

“M-1” alternative, planners had approved a comprehensive plan that covered a variety of transit modes. It proposed expanding local fixed-route bus service, and a significant increase in small bus service throughout the region. Express buses, with park-and-ride options would ease congestion downtown and provide access to the CBD. Commuter rail would receive an overhaul as well, depending on the progress of negotiations with existing rail lines. Proposed service would include a few round trips daily between the CBD and destinations like Mt. Clements and Pontiac, with trips lasting under an hour in some cases. Express bus and commuter rail service would be especially oriented to feed Young’s People Mover, including a new rail terminal- below a parking structure- as part of developments on the riverfront. Finally, along Woodward, a light rail line would begin at the State Fairgrounds, become elevated between McNichols and Grand Boulevard, and finish below the surface until it reached the riverfront. Traveling an average of 25 miles per hour, the line would include 15 stations, and provide for easy access to the People Mover in the CBD. To be completed in 1990, the system capital costs would total \$1.38 billion, with an annual operating cost of \$372 million adjusted for 1990 dollars. Federal funding, SEMTA planners anticipated, would cover \$1.11 billion of the capital costs, while the state would contribute \$276 million.¹⁴⁴

As SEMTA’s decision came to the public’s attention the next month, SEMTA General Manager Salci took it upon himself to support his agency’s efforts in an address to the “state legislature, elected officials, and interested citizens.” Approved by a two-thirds majority vote by the Board, Salci emphasized the potential of the light rail decision to stimulate commercial and development activity, as well as its aesthetic superiority over buses. Capital costs would be higher, he conceded, but would be outweighed by lower operating costs compared to buses. Additionally, the federal government would fund 80

¹⁴⁴ Executive Summary, in Briefing Paper: Proposed Regional transit System for Southeastern Michigan, April 10, 1979, SEMTA, Box 933, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

percent of capital costs, instead of 50 percent for operating costs, further justifying the choice. Citing a March 1979 report, Salci showed that the financial payoff for increased revenue to support the system would far exceed the small amount contributed by taxpayers, but local support was still hardly guaranteed.¹⁴⁵ Portraying the majority vote by SEMTA as a “consensus,” Salci hoped to demonstrate to a “reluctant” UMTA that the region was ready to come together to support the system.¹⁴⁶

Early progress reports from SEMTA were encouraging. A series of public forums on the People Mover had begun in Detroit, and officials completed cost estimates and a timeline for the project. If all went according to plan, it could be completed by the fall of 1983, costing about \$110 million to design and construct. Fed by the larger regional system, ridership expectations soared to 80,000 passengers per day. Headed by early transit booster Max Fisher, the Detroit Renaissance Board, a council of the city’s most influential businessmen and public figures, lent their support for the “current regional consensus that has developed,” and voted to accept SEMTA’s plan as drafted. SEMTA’s ridership continued to climb by the millions. Future progress, the report concluded, would depend on the continued progress of the People Mover project, the success of state funding plans, as well as local funding plans, and the essential merger between DDOT and SEMTA.¹⁴⁷ If these goals could be accomplished, Southeast Michigan would be on the verge of regional transit.

One month later, Milliken made progress with the state funding aspect, signing bills to add \$42 million to the new Comprehensive Transit Fund, which allocated funding especially for public transportation. However, negotiating the merger between city and suburban systems was proving difficult. Armed with recent studies that indicated the myriad

¹⁴⁵ Larry Salci address to the state legislature, elected officials, and interested citizens, May 29, 1979, SEMTA, Box 933, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹⁴⁶ Larry Salci address to the state legislature, elected officials, and interested citizens, April 5, 1979, Transportation 1979, Box 844, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹⁴⁷ SEMTA, Transit Update, July 1979, SEMTA, Box 933, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

complications a merger would provoke, city officials were holding off on their approval of SEMTA proposals.¹⁴⁸ As DDOT's director, Conrad Mallett explained in a *Detroit News* editorial, false claims that the federal UMTA required a consolidation of the two systems had surfaced, and he indicated that if Detroit could retain a measure of autonomy from their suburban neighbors, the history between the two dictated that they would pursue that option.¹⁴⁹ According to Milliken, however, the local revenue needed to round out funding for the regional plan would expire in 1980 unless the merger went through. Therefore, he continued to press leadership in the legislature to approve the merger, as well as the full transportation plan, both of which still required final review.¹⁵⁰

Michigan, Detroit, and SEMTA executives all seemed "willing and able," however, to accept the merger, and by mid-October, Michigan House members were assembled to study and plan such a consolidation.¹⁵¹ Young was persuaded only when he received assurances that a regional plan would indeed be approved. After months of collective pressure from leaders, sources close to Milliken anticipated a "unanimous" vote to in favor of the plan and the merger, a formal plan for which was forthcoming. SEMTA's annual report for 1979 struck a triumphant note. Aided by the energy crisis, ridership was still growing, and along with incremental service improvements, consensus had finally been reached on the \$1.4 billion regional transit plan. Representing an increase of over two times the transit currently available in the region, officials only waited for more developed plans in the coming years to

¹⁴⁸ Memo from Governor Milliken to James Kellogg, July 24, 1979, SEMTA, Box 933, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹⁴⁹ Conrad Mallett, Editorial in the *Detroit News*, July 16, 1979, Box 933, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹⁵⁰ Letter from Milliken to House and Senate Leadership, August 16, 1979, SEMTA, Box 933, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹⁵¹ Memo from T. Drake, October 10, 1979, SEMTA, Box 933, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

implement the final stages needed for comprehensive regional transit for Southeast Michigan.¹⁵²

4. Breaking Down

Such optimism would not last long. The 1980s loomed, marked by the ascension of California Republican Ronald Reagan to the presidency. Even before the effects of his economic policy could be fully felt, however, Michigan officials signaled the imminent collapse of regional transit's support structure. As early as January 4th, 1980, aides informed the governor of declining funds in the Comprehensive Transportation Fund. The increased demand for transit service that SEMTA associated with unprecedented success was becoming problematic, as state government struggled to distribute limited funds to proliferating numbers of programs.¹⁵³

On March 19, 1980, Milliken was forced to address Michiganders with woeful news. "Michigan is clearly in a recession," the governor conceded, as the auto industry, upon which the entire state was inextricably dependent, had declined by 10.6 percent, with further losses expected.¹⁵⁴ In response to rising inflation during the late 1970s, the Carter administration ordered drastic cuts to federal programs, sapping Michigan's budget further. Federal support for transit projects was especially constrained, including the Federal Highway Administration, which posted over \$1 billion in cuts that affected over 189 different projects alone.¹⁵⁵ In turn, Milliken described his 1981 budget as "the most constrained [he] ever submitted."¹⁵⁶ All his efforts to achieve adequate funding for transit would surely not avoid their inevitable demise.

¹⁵² SEMTA, Annual Report, 1979, SEMTA, Box 933, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹⁵³ Memo J. Kellogg to Milliken, January 4, 1980, Transportation Budget 1979-80, Box 749, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹⁵⁴ Remarks by Governor Milliken, March 19, 1980, Transportation 1980, Box 844, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹⁵⁵ Executive Office Memo, June 24, 1980, Transportation 1980, Box 844, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹⁵⁶ Remarks by Governor Milliken, March 19, 1980.

Regional agencies like SEMTA and SEMCOG, which had been serving as the nerve-center for transit development over the past decade, received a substantial portion of their funding from the state, which was now in serious jeopardy. Budget shortfalls for SEMTA alone were increasing by the millions, and though the agency believed they could sustain themselves for the short-term, long-term plans had to be re-evaluated.¹⁵⁷ SEMCOG's analysis presented an even darker view, however, as the increased ridership, coupled with declining revenues was chewing through Southeast Michigan's transit infrastructure. Already operating at capacity, the inability to repair and replace the underfunded system spelled imminent crisis.¹⁵⁸ Squeezed between federal funding losses and declining revenues from local member governments, SEMCOG's budget was hemorrhaging to the tune of hundreds of thousands of dollars. Though the agency brought in four dollars worth of federal funding for every one dollar spent by the state and localities, regional agencies were on the chopping block, but state funding for local governments continued to receive support.¹⁵⁹

As the funding apparatus that had supported regional transit proposals collapsed, so too did the tentative regional cooperation that had allowed plans to progress so far. Though never quite the unified bloc that planners hoped would somehow materialize, the negotiation process between regional governments was giving way to scandal and isolationism. In June of 1980, the *Detroit News* ran a story documenting an alleged plot by the Oakland County Road Commission to sabotage regional public transportation. According to reports, the commission had spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to fight proposals for a subway along Woodward Avenue. The money financed a diluted regional transit plan, titled the Tri-County

¹⁵⁷ Memo from Al Ward to Jim Jordan, SEMCOG Transportation Plan, Box 933, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹⁵⁸ SEMCOG, "The Regional Systems Management Element of the Regional Transportation Plan," March 1980, SEMCOG Transportation Plan, Box 933, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹⁵⁹ Letter from Bovitz and Ravitz to State Senator Glusac, May 23, 1980, SEMCOG State Grants for Regional Planning, Box 933, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

Transit Proposal- which omitted the SEMTA-approved Woodward subway- as well as two surveys. The first intended to show that Oakland County residents opposed rapid transit along Woodward, while the other sought to gauge local support for withdrawing from SEMTA entirely. Additionally, the commission was blamed for paying an outside promoter to advertise an outrageous “sky train” for the region. The commission’s Vice Chairman, and Chairman of the Michigan chapter of the Reagan for President Committee, John Gnau, had voiced his intention to lobby against the subway, but the covert methods he and the commission supposedly employed irked transit supporters.¹⁶⁰

The *Oakland Press* responded by blaming Governor Milliken for inciting the false claims.¹⁶¹ However, regardless of the validity of the *Detroit News*’ assertions, the controversy was a prime example of crumbling relations among local governments, as well as between local and state cooperation. Furthermore, the alleged actions of the commission may represent broader outstate strategies to derail public transportation. Where outright opposition might fail, inadequate alternatives would force further negotiation and prolong delays. Harnessing the voices of suburban tax-payers reluctant pay for programs that might benefit Detroit would be equally effective, while secession from SEMTA flexed the unfettered power of suburban localities to subvert the regional consensus necessary to make regional transit a reality. Those same tax-payers would be even less likely to support any program that smacked of unnecessary excess, especially during a period of austerity. As the symbol of state efforts to force the burden of regional transit on Southeast Michigan residents, Governor Milliken’s political capital suffered as his image as moderate coalition-builder sagged under the weight of failing transit efforts.

¹⁶⁰ Sue Taylor Martin and Howard Warren, “Oakland Panel Faces Probe on Road Funds: Subway Battle Key Issue,” *Detroit News*, June 3, 1980, Transportation 1980, Box 844, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹⁶¹ No Author Given, Editorial in the *Oakland Press*, June 21, 1980, Transportation 1980, Box 844, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

The first year of the 1980s came to a close with the approval of bills to reduce transit funding in the Michigan legislature.¹⁶² In January 1981, the Census delivered another crucial blow, as results reflected Detroit's plummeting population, and therefore drastically reduced funds for public transportation by almost one third.¹⁶³ Reagan's policies heavily emphasized local self-determination, rather than the regional solutions that informed the rise of regional transit. The new president planned to quickly phase out all federal operating subsidies for transit, not only undercutting already struggling urban systems, but threatening any capital projects currently developing.¹⁶⁴ Desperately, Milliken and transit allies attempted to salvage the promised federal funding by adjusting it to fit "significant reductions." Deliberations resulted in a plan that only found room for the light rail system and the People Mover- the two elements that consisted of large capital investments that Washington would fund, rather than operational expansion and infrastructure improvements.¹⁶⁵

Despite pleas by Milliken to federal officials urging them to honor commitments to completing work on mass transit, it was disappearing from the agendas of decision makers. Descriptions of a transportation package under consideration in the Michigan legislature hardly mentioned regional public transit, focusing instead on the condition of roads and bridges throughout the state. The package would devote over 90 percent of proposed revenue sources to highways, while "comprehensive transit" a portion of which could be used for public transit, remained an afterthought.¹⁶⁶ As public transit funding evaporated, private transportation funding continued in earnest. Final approval of a federally funded project to

¹⁶² Executive Office Memo, December 30, 1980, Transportation 1980, Box 844, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹⁶³ John Woodford, Memo to Governor Milliken, January 21, 1981, SEMTA, Box 933, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹⁶⁴ John Curley, "Transit Suppliers Face Rough Times as Reagan Slashes Subsidies to Cities," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 22, 1981, Accessed March 29, 2015.

¹⁶⁵ William Milliken, Memo to Andrew Lewis Jr., March 12, 1981, Transportation 1980, Box 844, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹⁶⁶ No Author Given, "Transportation Package," March 10, 1982, Transportation 1980, Box 844, William G. Milliken Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

complete the Detroit interstate highway system arrived, devoting \$300 million and 8 years of construction to supporting the Motor City's defining industry.

As the 1980s progressed, the federal government was removing itself as a potential option for transit funds. Citing both executive and legislative stances against raising taxes, the UMTA began informing cities drowning in transit deficits to "trim" their requests, or lose out on any available money. Drastic cuts meant that of the multi-billion dollar requests being made for multiple projects across the country, the federal government would be distributing just over one billion by 1986, demonstrating the real meaning of "trim" under Reagan's administration.¹⁶⁷ The president's 1982 budget revealed the gravity of his commitment to defunding mass transit projects, reducing the amount allocated by the Carter administration by almost one-fourth, and assuming "no funding for any new rail transit systems that are not under construction."¹⁶⁸ These budget projections basically doomed any concrete progress on Detroit's Woodward light rail project, leaving only the People Mover as a viable option for the city.

SEMTA, the agency that represented the region's best hope for a cooperative effort toward regional transit, was frankly dying. After a decade of expansion in operations and planning development, the loss of both state and federal funds saw them cut service by 18 percent in 1982, and then 27 percent the following year. Ridership declined along with reduced funding, as the agency rapidly lost legitimacy. Eventually, it was clear SEMTA was unable even to continue presiding over the People Mover project, which Detroit took over in 1985. By 1988, SEMTA dissolved into the Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional

¹⁶⁷ No Author Given, "Cities Urged to Trim Transit Fund Requests," *The New York Times*, May 21, 1984, Accessed March 27, 2015.

¹⁶⁸ Committee on the Budget (U.S. House of Representatives, "A Summary and Analysis of President Reagan's Fiscal Year 1982 Budget Revisions," March 1981, pg. 40, Accessed March 29, 2015.

Transportation (SMART), devoted to transit outside the city, and leaving DDOT to operate within Detroit.¹⁶⁹ The dream of a unified Southeast Michigan transit system was dead.

The 1980s was the beginning of the end of the progress planners, elected officials, and regional agencies had made over the past decade. Though initiated even before he took office, President Reagan presided over the end of financial support for regional approaches to urban problems such as inadequate public transportation. Supported primarily by state and federal subsidies, regional agencies were never designed to support their own weight, and as government funding collapsed, so did their authority and ability to craft regional consensus. Mature and diverse local governments ultimately refused to acknowledge any responsibility for the city that spawned them, and successfully prevented the regional unification necessary to bring regional transit to Southeast Michigan.

¹⁶⁹ Robert Campbell and Jack Schramm, "SEMTA and SMART," *Motor Coach Age*, Vol. 54, No. 4, (October-December 2003), EC. 4D: Detroit- Public Transportation, Subject Vertical File, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

Epilogue

On July 31st, 1987, the Detroit People Mover opened to the public. Finished two years late and hopelessly over-budget at \$200 million; the project limped into existence with great fanfare, but little optimism from regional residents. After aggressive lobbying by Mayor Young, the federal government covered 80 percent of the cost, with the rest coming from state and local funds. By the mid-1980s, federal officials, including UMTA chief Ralph Stanley, referred to the project as “a pork-barrel project gone wild.”¹⁷⁰ Polls by the *Detroit Free Press* and *Detroit News* indicated that the vast majority of respondents said “the People Mover was a bad idea” or would not ride it.

At the time of opening, officials aimed to service 16,000 people per day on their CBD circulator, just a fraction of original estimates set as high as 80,000 a decade earlier.¹⁷¹ More recently, the monorail averaged only about 3,000 per day,¹⁷² solidifying conceptions of the project as a joke. Taken over by the city of Detroit in 1985, after persistent construction problems forced SEMTA to relinquish it, Mayor Young had finally completed his defining transit project. Crucially, however, the regional system that was designed to feed the People Mover had utterly collapsed, converting the 2.9 mile elevated monorail from a crown jewel to an epitaph.¹⁷³

¹⁷⁰ Damon Darlin, “The People Mover May Run Someday, Has Overrun Already,” *The Wall Street Journal*, April 30, 1985, Accessed March 29, 2015.

¹⁷¹ Isabel Wilkerson, “Years Late, Detroit’s Monorail Opens,” *The New York Times*, August 1, 1987, Accessed March 29, 2015.

¹⁷² Campbell and Schramm, “SEMTA and SMART.”

¹⁷³ Wilkerson, “Years Late.”

Conclusion

As the 1960s became the 1970s, Michigan policy-makers were beginning to grasp the importance of a comprehensive, regional rapid transit system for the state's economic epicenter, Southeast Michigan. In 1967, the Michigan legislature established the Southeast Michigan Transportation Authority (SEMTA) for the Detroit and its surrounding counties as part of a larger commitment to remedying the region's transit deficiencies during the next decade.¹⁷⁴ The economic decline that the city had begun to experience, coupled with a shift in planning scholarship that recognized the failure of urban redevelopment policies finally seemed to signal a re-evaluation of industrial decline. Decentralization of industry and population created a multi-centered region that seemed no longer to rely on the city. Responding to a thickening atmosphere of urban crisis nationwide, federal policy shifted in the 1960s to open a window of federal funding for urban and regional projects, such as public transportation. Within this context, a doctrine of regional consolidation and cooperation slowly developed, supported by federal and state officials, as well as powerful Detroit business interests. Experts advocated regional agencies like SEMTA, and the recently established Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG), to stitch the region together and support struggling municipal systems. Armed with data from studies such as the Detroit Regional Transportation and Land Use Study (TALUS), state, regional, and local government officials, as well as planners that searched for the solutions to regional fragmentation and economic decline, began advocating a regional transit network, including both rail and rapid transit.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ Utpal Dutta, *Detroit Transit History: Chapter 2- Timeline/ Summary Detroit History 1860- 2012*, Phase Two of a Study by the University of Detroit Mercy's Transit Research Team, Member of the Mineta National Transit Research Consortium, Sponsored by Sponsored by the US Department of Transportation and the Michigan Department of Transportation: 15 January, 2013. Pg. 11. Accessed 6 November, 2014. http://eng-sci.udmercy.edu/opportunities/research/udmtc/reports/pdf/Transit_Study_Detroit_History_1-15-13_FINAL.pdf.

¹⁷⁵ Leo Hanifin and Scott Douglas, *Detroit Transit History: Chapter 4 Transit Politics and Leadership in Detroit (1862 - 2007)*, Phase Two of a Study by the University of Detroit Mercy's Transit Research Team,

Coinciding with the administrations of Governor William Milliken, and Mayor Coleman Young, Detroit's first black mayor, the regional transit that Southeast Michigan desperately needed began to gain momentum at multiple levels of government. Despite Federal and State funding that seemed imminent in the 1970s, and the innovative planning work that had contributed to planning measures like "Moving Detroit Forward" and the efforts by agencies such as SEMCOG and SEMTA, this grand vision for regional transit was not to be. Political opposition from many suburban and outstate political bodies, which capitalized on state municipality powers and outstate refusal to contribute to the cause of the struggling central city, blocked regional transit efforts at every turn.¹⁷⁶ Joel Batterman sums up suburban reactions well:

"Many whites feared that rapid transit would endanger the suburbs by providing access to poor black Detroiters. Whites turned out in the hundreds to Southeast Michigan Transportation Authority (SEMTA) planning meetings, according to the *Detroit News*, protesting the "undesirables, transit crime and low-income housing" that they believed new transit links would bring to their doorsteps. Others, terming mass transit "child transit," believed that SEMTA would facilitate school busing for racial desegregation. Most of all, whites resented the redistributionist implications of a Woodward subway serving majority black Detroit, asking why 'Coleman Young's welfare city can have a free ride while Oakland County foots the bill.'¹⁷⁷

After monumental, yet unfulfilled efforts by transit planners and supporters during the 1970s, the election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency in 1980 signaled the death-knell of federal funds for city projects, especially those that offended white, suburban sensibilities, further gutting any prospective efforts. The only part of ambitious regional transit plans that survived was the People Mover, completed in 1987, which went far over-budget, and accomplished little for regional, or city connectivity, as it was confined to the central business

Member of the Mineta National Transit Research Consortium, Sponsored by Sponsored by the US Department of Transportation and the Michigan Department of Transportation: 15 January, 2013. Pg. 18-22. Accessed 6 November, 2014.

http://eng-sci.udmercy.edu/opportunities/research/udmtc/reports/pdf/Transit_Study_Detroit_History_1-15-13_FINAL.pdf

¹⁷⁶ Hanifin and Douglas, *Detroit Transit History: Chapter 4*, 18-22.

¹⁷⁷ Hanifin and Douglas, *Detroit Transit History: Chapter 4*, 20.

district. Appropriately, SEMTA dissolved in 1988, replaced by the Southeastern Michigan Authority for Regional Transportation (SMART), and left Detroit transit to the Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT), which had taken over for the DSR in 1974.¹⁷⁸

Led by public and private interests, such as Governor Milliken, Mayor Young, and certain business leaders that sought to preserve their investments in Detroit, regional transit supporters faced immense resistance as a result of the structural development of the region and state as a whole. The preeminence of local power that Michigan granted to localities led to the proliferation of regional governments, and thus fragmentation of the region. In response to efforts to bring these fragmented interests together, these localities were thus able to exercise the disproportionate influence that they reserved, ultimately rejecting proposals that they perceived as threatening, especially to local taxpayers. As cities like Detroit declined, they persuaded the federal government to offer substantial support for urban resources like public transit, but Southeast Michigan's particular aversion to cooperation to achieve regional goals disallowed efforts to take advantage of this brief period of federal support, which evaporated abruptly as the 1980s and the presidency of Ronald Reagan began. Thus, the planning and funding efforts of the forces of regional cohesion ultimately failed to provide the concrete transit improvements the region's citizens required, solidifying the transit crisis that continues to this day and severely undercutting any further attempts to reverse the decline that Detroit has experienced over the past half-century. Only recently has public transit begun to enter public discourse again, as the passage of a Regional Transit Authority indicates.¹⁷⁹

In sum, the history of public transportation in Southeast Michigan is one of prolonged frustration, driven by racial and regional divisions that consistently disallowed the political

¹⁷⁸ Hanifin and Douglas, *Detroit Transit History: Chapter 4*, 18-23.

¹⁷⁹ Dutta, *Detroit Transit History: Chapter 2*, 11.

will necessary to implement an effective and widespread system. The domination of the auto industry, which created the modern industrial metropolis in the region, and the infrastructure that supported it, systematically opposed other forms of more equitable transportation, resulting in the eventual decline of the city in the second half of the 20th century, continuing to today. Despite the recognition of the value of public transportation for a brief spell during the administrations of Coleman Young and William Milliken, the regional divisions that had crystallized during the post-war years were enough to fight off any legitimate attempts at implementing regional transit. This established the fragmentation and political aversion to public transportation, along with the city that required it, that allowed federal budget reductions to eventually signal the end of comprehensive transit reform in the region.

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