

Failed Linkages

Detroit's People Mover in the Context of a Southeast Michigan Regional Transportation System

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Describing his business plans as early as 1909, Henry Ford's intentions to "build a motor car for the great multitude" were as clear as ever (Jackson, 1985). He envisioned this car, affordable to any man making a good salary, to enable him to "enjoy with his family the blessings of hours of pleasure in God's great open spaces" (Jackson, 1985). Contrarily, the great motor-accessibility that Ford offered American markets made necessary the literal concretization of "God's great open spaces," and in doing so paved the way for the decline of many American cities, Ford's own Detroit in particular. As if burdened with the legacy of his grandfather's creation in all its capacity to fuel the decline of the city out of which it rose, as CEO of Ford Motors, Henry Ford II in his own words, "heartily" endorsed the Detroit People Mover in 1976 from the removed comfort of his Dearborn headquarters (SEMATA, 1976). The public light-rail, which currently makes an elevated 2.9-mile loop around the city's Central Business District, was intended as a means of reconnecting areas of the city sliced up by freeways and parking lots, in hopes of triggering economic revitalization. However, in all of its potential to revitalize through linking buildings and activity centers with shops and offices, the People Mover is itself the product of failed linkages. The story of its conception, construction and controversy points towards the geographical-made-ideological, urban-suburban, auto-enabled division which prevented its incorporation into a larger transit system and therefore compromised any potential for the rail to act as the "savior of a dying city" that many optimistic Michigan residents had imagined (Wilkerson, 1987).

"People Movers" appeared as a potential urban transportation solution during the spring of 1972. In Chantilly, VA four private companies showcased their versions of what were technically referred to as "Personal Rapid Transit" systems (Witkins, 1972). Granted 1.5 million each in development funds by the Department of Urban Mass Transit Administration (UMTA), four private contractors, one of which was Ford Motors, offered alternative versions of a six to thirty person, gondola-like vehicle and guide way system that would "help rescue urban America from strangulation by automobile traffic" (Witkins, 1972). In a nation addicted to the ever-convenient "freedom of mobility" granted by auto use, planners anticipated the "personal" taxi-like nature of the people mover concept to be an attractive public transportation alternative to personal vehicle users (Witkins, 1972). Throughout the country, politicians envisioned that the

implementation of a successful downtown People Mover model would warrant a car ban in congested downtown areas for the first time in history: a move that could allow for the return to mixed-use streets as opposed to the "no-man's-land" traffic brutalized areas that had become the urban American norm (Duany et al., 2000).

Four years later, President Gerald Ford offered the Southeast Michigan Transportation Authority (SEMATA) \$600 million for the construction of a rail transit system, allowing the region a great deal of freedom to draft and deploy a coherent system of mass transportation (Michigan House of Representatives). Under these circumstances, the People Mover appeared to be a winning component of a larger system and was overwhelmingly supported by then Governor William Milliken, both houses of Michigan's legislature, SEMATA, as well as the Central Business District Association (Michigan House of Representatives). The project made particular sense in light of the specific problems outlined by SEMATA's proposal, which identified traffic congestion within the Central Business District as a significant factor in its lack of appeal to visitors and pedestrians. At the time, vehicles entered the district from three freeway-bordered sides, and a fourth side from the Detroit River Tunnel (SEMATA, 1976). Within such a small and confined area, where on and off ramps were concentrated amidst one-way streets and numerous parking lots, drivers had to be significantly "well oriented" if they were to successfully navigate the area. Likewise, only "well oriented" pedestrians could navigate the district without putting themselves in danger (SEMATA, 1976).

How could an area with these problems expect to allure visitors, shoppers, diners or any sort of reliable economic activity? The SEMATA proposal made the People Mover out to be a solution to this congestive demise. In addition to its "major aesthetic appeal," the People Mover would attempt to separate vehicular and pedestrian activity, locating parking lots outside of the 13 planned stations and freeing up land previously used as parking space for higher density use (SEMATA, 1976). The elevated railway was planned to act as a pedestrian friendly matrix between major activity nodes such as the Renaissance Center, Joe Louis Arena and the Cobo Center (SEMATA, 1976). In theory, such drastically improved mobility would further stimulate total demand for trips within downtown.

Quantified, the projected benefits of Detroit's People Mover were equally if not more impressive.

Economists anticipated an increase of 10.6 million in retail sales in addition to significant increases in property tax revenue due to the intensive development of the city's core. Additionally, the surge in income tax revenue due to employment gains was expected to reach seventeen million per year (SEMTA, 1976). Generating \$6 to \$11.1 for every dollar expended on the initial capital cost, the presumed self-sufficient People Mover, at least in SEMTA's report, appeared to truly exhibit potential to "serve as an extremely important catalyst in the continuing plan to enhance and revitalize Detroit" (SEMTA, 1976).

Recognizing that a lack of high quality transit service to the Central Business District (CBD) was responsible "at least in part, for the declining position of the CBD as the major regional activity center," a crucial component to the proposed People Mover was its intended use as a link between present and future modes of transportation. Released in 1974 and approved by SEMTA in 1979, the Southeast Regional Transportation Plan envisioned a coordinated hierarchy of transit systems comprised of five major components (Michigan House of Representatives). The detailed plan included six rapid-transit corridor guide ways connecting the major activity centers in the Southeast metropolitan region complemented by 179 miles of radial and circumferential rapid transit bus lines within the same area (SEMTA, 1976). A commuter rail would provide service beyond the range of the metropolitan system, and buses would fill in the gaps by providing increased sub-regional and community level routes (SEMTA, 1976). Given these four constructs, SEMTA planned for the People Mover to collect and distribute riders of the bus and rail system, thereby expanding the cohesion and area of influence of the system in its entirety.

As promising as this Regional Transportation Plan appeared in 1976, the People Mover is the only component that has since materialized, and illogically so. From 1970 to 1975, years during which the People Mover concept was in its formative stages, the population in Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties remained unchanged (Wayne and Oakland County Road Commission, 1977). However over the course of these five years, the three counties saw a dramatic shift in population from Wayne County, which had a -5.6 percent growth rate over the period, to Oakland and Macomb counties, which grew by 7.2 and 7.0 percent respectively (Wayne and Oakland County Road Commission, 1977). Given Wayne County's significant population loss over this five year period, the last thing the Southeast region needed was a 2.9 mile elevated railway that allowed only Detroit's remaining million residents to ride around in circles, basking in the absence of their tax dollars. Rather than circulating in isolation, Detroit needed some sort of physical lifeline—be it a connection to jobs outside the city or the facilitation of tax dollars generated by

city visitors. Various committees proposed regional transit plans only to be neglected and then dismissed in 1979, again in 1984 and once more in 1985 (Michigan House of Representatives). Meanwhile the People Mover continued moving through its many phases of development, and was completed in 1987.

Skeptical of the People Mover's ability to truly benefit Detroit, UMTA officials within the Reagan administration attempted to eliminate federal money allotted for the light-rail in 1985 (Detroit Free Press, 1987). Yet despite the continual decline of daily ridership projections, which had fallen from 55,000 to 16,000 by the People Mover's opening day on July 31, 1987, mayor Coleman Young's perseverance won back federal money for the project (Detroit Free Press, 2000). Despite the symbolic value of its completion, the entire process was laden with technical problems ranging from cracked and shattered concrete beams and broken glass, to a year-long service disruption resulting from the Hudson building demolition in 1998 (Detroit Free Press, 1999). During the thirteen months of disrupted service in 1998, dramatically longer riding times made ridership plummet from the already low 8,000 per day to an excruciating 1,500 upon its reopening in 1999 (Detroit Free Press, 1999). Soon after, a General Motors effort to improve the Renaissance Center People Mover station closed the loop for a short period of time, requiring its riders to use a much less convenient two-way shuttle leaving one Detroit Free Press interviewee to wonder "if the elevated light-rail system will ever live up to its promise as a lynchpin for a much needed mass transit system" (2000). A 1987 article in the New York Times attributed the inability to incorporate the People Mover into a larger rail system to cost overruns and the drying up of Federal transportation funds. While requiring significantly more capital than initially projected, the People Mover consumed 157.2 million, roughly one quarter of the 600 million Gerald Ford had originally offered in 1976 (Detroit Free Press, 2000). Squandered on carelessly planned and poorly designed projects intended to strengthen the People Mover's route, 442.8 million of President Ford's initial grant remains unaccounted for (Detroit Free Press, 2000).

Though structural and cosmetic construction are important when considering both the quality of life in Detroit as well as the city's ability to allure visitors, no such project, regardless of its intent, should have been permitted to stand in the way of any component of the city's day-to-day functionality. Had regional oversight been involved, adherence to a shared goal of connection and a focus placed on the equitable and efficient distribution of funds to the People Mover project would have likely resulted in fewer segments of useless train track, and a chance for a successful, better incorporated light-rail in the long-term.

Along Alter Road in Detroit runs a wall dividing “Disneyland” and “West Beirut,” or wealthy, neatly trimmed, largely white Grosse Pointe from the poor, burned out, primarily black East Side of the city (Jackson, 1985). Physically separate from the city so in need of a regional transit lifeline, suburbanites appear perfectly happy within the bubble in which they have chosen to live. In a market opinion survey conducted in 1976, Southeastern Michigan suburbanites expressed their contentment with remaining physically and economically within the suburbs they had fled to. For work and shopping trips, the two activities that most frequently require transportation, the majority of those surveyed expressed greater personal utility for improved in-county public transportation rather than out-county public transportation. The survey shows that 88% of participants in Wayne County, 76% of participants in Oakland County, and 73% of participants in Macomb County expressed such desire (Wayne and Oakland County Road Commission). Yet these opinions are largely the product of pragmatism: zoning regulations responsible for the many dense shopping facilities that characterize suburbia make shopping trips in downtown Detroit largely impractical.

When regional transit system concepts have been proposed, as in 1979, 1984 and 1985, taxpayers accustomed to using their personal vehicles resent the allotment of their tax dollars to a system that they do not intend to utilize and often heavily oppose construction of local transit links (SEMCOG, 2000).

The few transportation connections to and from Detroit that do exist have been the first to be eliminated in times of economic hardship.

For example, in attempt to save some \$10.5 million during a 1975 budget deficit, SEMTA eliminated seven daily trips from its service: three of which connected Crocker to Detroit, and three of which connected Jefferson Beach to Detroit (Gross Point News 1974). When paired with auto-enabled suburban independence from the city, the elimination of rider sourcing by way of bus route removal makes a mockery of the empty People Mover, which cannot play the part of collector/distributor of people if there is no collection or distribution to be made. As anticipated by one resident on the day of its opening, disconnected from the suburbs, the People Mover is nothing more than a “nice looking Stonehenge” (Wilkerson, 1987).

Politicians have also played an integral role in the prevention of a consolidated, functional regional transit system in Southeast Michigan. Former Republican House Speaker Craig DeRoche is a perfect example of a blatant impediment to cohesion between Detroit and its suburbs

(Schneider, 2005). Not even attempting subtlety, DeRoche identified himself in 2004 as a “representative of sprawl” (Schneider, 2005). With the majority of his campaign contributions coming from energy, real estate, concrete, utility and development companies, DeRoche earmarked a significant portion of Michigan’s annual \$10 million of economic development funds for new highways and other auto-oriented projects outside of Detroit throughout his three terms (Schneider, 2005). By crafting the policies and controlling the funds responsible for sprawl, politicians like DeRoche fuel a perpetual cycle disallowing the implementation of regional public transportation projects like that released by SEMTA in 1974 (Michigan House of Representatives). With a significant portion of tax dollars allotted to development by politicians’ campaign donors in the outermost suburbs, newer, well-maintained infrastructure naturally allures mobile residents out of the city and its inner suburbs. As people spread out over vast amounts of space and grow increasingly dependent on the 1.6 million cars that have been added to the road since 1970, public transportation becomes both less rational and less desirable in the eyes of suburban taxpayers and their representatives (Schneider, 2005). In 2007, suburban Livingston County’s unemployment rate was 5.2 percent with 5.5 percent of households earning an income under \$14,999 per year (US Census, 2007). In stark contrast, Detroit’s 2007 unemployment rate was 11.7 percent, and 28.1 percent of households earned under \$14,999 (US

Census, 2007). As the physical space between the suburbs and the city grows, trips past the Alter road division are less rational and less desirable for affluent suburban dwellers living nearby. Meanwhile city dwellers find car ownership

the key to mobility beyond their means. With politicians like DeRoche “standing for sprawl,” what are Detroiters stranded in the city, literally without inlet our outlet supposed to do?

The Southeastern Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG), a regional planning partnership whose mission is “to solve regional problems by improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the region’s local governments,” has played no lesser a role in preventing a coherent system of regional public transportation than the politicians it aims to coordinate. In theory, SEMCOG facilitates cooperation between 147 local governments, institutions and state and federal agencies (Schneider, 2004). However, in practice, delegates within the organization are principally loyal to the desires of their constituents at the expense of intended cooperation and regional transportation. Systematic in its approach to seeing local projects through, constituents active within

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SEMCOG nominate projects that are discussed and given priority by an advisory committee (Schneider, 2004). Once nominated, selected projects are passed on to SEMCOG's executive committee, which retains the ultimate say in project decisions and in how much money each receives. The problem with this system is one of disproportionate representation. Within the 51 member executive committee, a sparsely populated new suburban area like Livingston County has four votes to represent its 172,000 residents. Detroit, a city containing a population more than five times the size of all of Livingston County has a mere three representatives on the executive committee despite its 920,000 residents. The consequences are far reaching. Despite the fact that a third of the Southeast region's residents don't drive, only \$145 million per year is given to the region's two bus lines while amounts of one to two billion are spent just to widen single portions of Interstate-75 because of auto-dependent suburban overrepresentation (Schneider, 2004). Though in a 2000 conference report SEMCOG members brought to attention the need for increased general connectivity of regional public transit, the overrepresentation of suburban delegates on an executive committee possessing the power to deny funding to regional makes the materialization of a coherent public transportation system unlikely without a fundamental shift in attitude.

Indicative of Southeastern Michigan's notorious uncooperativeness, during a visit to Detroit in mid-October of this year, US Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood made his message clear: "get your act together regionally, or forget help from Washington" (Gerritt, 2009). Until Michigan's private and public sectors share in the realization that the urban-suburban divide has been actively broken and public money should be turned towards the strengthening and connecting of the central city and its existing suburbs, Detroit's People Mover will remain "no more than a tail without a dog" (Detroit Free Press, 1987). Presently, a regional high-speed rail running from Ann Arbor to Detroit with stops in Ypsilanti, Detroit Metro Airport, and Dearborn is scheduled to begin service in October of 2010 (SEMCOG, 2009). Though exciting indeed, once functional, this commuter rail will comprise only one of many corridors recurrently planned and dismissed. This collaboration must persist into the future to ensure the fruition of a comprehensive mass transit system which would truly allow for, in Henry Ford's words, the "great multitude" to "enjoy with his family the blessings of hours of pleasure." Only in the event of collaborative success will there be people to follow the People Mover brochure's suggestion to "Go! See! Shop! Eat!" in the downtown area. Only under these circumstances can Detroit and the People Mover's empty, isolated 2.9-mile loop of perpetuity be broken.

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