

# Metro Detroit still struggling to agree on regional transit plan

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Despite the weekly announcement of new developments in Detroit, from stadiums to skyscrapers, the city still faces a number of systemic issues that continue to plague its large population of economically disadvantaged residents. One of these issues, the topic of much-heated debate in recent years, is transit. The 2016 election represented a chance for the entire southeast Michigan region to reinvigorate its mass transit system, but a “no” vote sent planners and citizens back to the drawing board in hopes of a second try in 2018.

The Regional Transit Master Plan, put forward by the Regional Transit Authority of Southeast Michigan (RTA), was meant to unify mass transit in the four counties surrounding Detroit with \$4.7 billion in new investments, raised from a new tax and available state and federal funds. The RTA was founded in 2012 to successfully achieve this, after nearly half a century of other failed authorities. Going back as far as the 1950s, transit has been strictly divided between the mostly white suburbs and the mostly African American Detroit. And while there are many indications that this was a racial issue when the policy was made, today it has become an economic issue that many believe can no longer be ignored.

Detroit's transportation needs are enigmatic in many ways. The city is in the top ten for least car owners per capita, while it does not even chart in per-capita spending on mass transit. While three in five Detroiters work outside of the city, often in low-paying jobs, three in four jobs in the city are filled by workers from the suburbs. This means that Detroit has one of the longest average commuting distances in the country, a bit over ten miles. Many areas of the city don't have nearly enough jobs, some as low as 100 positions per 1,000 residents. All of this together means that the economies of the suburbs and the city are inextricably linked; reliable mass transit would be an undeniable asset.

The Regional Transit Master Plan was designed specifically to address these disparities and provide more comprehensive service to the entire region. Regional bus rapid transit (BRT) routes would run from the suburbs to the city center, new routes would be developed in currently underserved areas, and a regional light rail would stretch from Detroit to Ann Arbor. One of the major aspects of the plan, which was also one of the most debated, was that it would no longer allow individual suburbs to opt out of the transit system. Currently 50 suburbs have no mass transit system, as they have opted out of the Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation (SMART). This is cited as being one of the main reasons for service gaps in outlying areas. Another issue facing opposition was the funding model, which included a new tax that would cost most taxpayers approximately \$95 per year over the next 20 years.

When the plan came up for vote in the November 2016 election, it was rejected by roughly 20,000 votes, losing 49.5 percent to 50.5 percent. The measure was approved in two of the counties, and came close in a third. Alone, the fourth, Macomb County, was able to sway the outcome. One year on, the RTA is still trying to figure out a path forward with the possibility of another proposal in 2018.

Not waiting for that possibility, the suburban transit system, SMART, is launching its own extended BRT system to provide greater links to the city. Detroit has made recent transit headway also. The QLine, a new streetcar that was in the works before the regional plan and which relies partially on private funding, opened in 2017. Currently, discussions have started within the RTA concerning a new proposal. Early ideas have included reducing the area the authority is responsible for. The RTA has noted that roughly 28 percent of the "no" votes in the election came from more rural areas that would be less directly affected by a regional transit system. As the RTA was specifically established to build a regional transit system, enacting a plan is more than just a goal; it is do-or-die for the organization. If no plan is pushed forward, many fear the RTA will go the way of the numerous other regional planning authorities before it.

While Detroit's transit situation may be singular in its dire position, it is not the only metropolitan area that has seen a renewed interest in comprehensive mass transit. This was highlighted in the rush of dozens of cities to bid for Amazon HQ2. In Amazon's request for proposals, it specifically stated that it was looking for a city with efficient, reliable mass transit. While this did not stop cities like Detroit from applying, many will likely point to it as a reason Detroit will not get the call from Amazon. Even cities like Chicago, with well-established, well-

funded mass transit, are looking to the near future for improvements. The 2018–2023 Regional Transit Strategic Plan, put forward by the Regional Transit Authority of the Chicago area, just finished an initial round of public input, and the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning is working on the On to 2050 plan, which includes extensive regional transit guidance. Chicago also happens to be a contender for the Amazon HQ2 project, and transit has been one of its major selling points.

The path ahead of the Detroit metropolitan area's transit future is currently very unclear. Even when suburban and urban agencies were able to come together behind a comprehensive plan, their constituencies thwarted them. While the city itself has enjoyed a recent spotlight surrounding new development, particularly in its downtown, any Detroiter will tell you that the city has a long way to go to match its prosperous past. Many hope that effective transit will also help bring economic opportunity to the many who have never had it.