

**A Study of Factors that Inhibit and Enable Development of Sustainable Regional Transit Systems in Southeastern Michigan**

# **Regional Transit Stew: Consensus Building and Transit Building in Metro Detroit**

One of seven final reports resulting from this project.



MNTRC Report 12-22



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REPORT 12-22

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One of seven final reports resulting from this project.

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During the course of this fifteen-month study, the authors interviewed over 60 leaders from five regions, Detroit, Atlanta, Cleveland, Denver and St. Louis. The University of Detroit Mercy (UDM) team is grateful for their time and candor in discussing the myriad transit issues and experiences with us. These leaders include:

- Regional Transit Authority (RTA) Leaders in all five regions
- RTA Board presidents in Detroit, St. Louis and Denver
- Other RTA Board members in Atlanta and Detroit
- Metropolitan Planning Organizations in Southeast Michigan and Atlanta
- Transit advocacy coalitions in St. Louis and Detroit
- Transit reporters in Detroit (*Crain's Business* and *Detroit News*) and Atlanta (*Atlanta Constitution*)
- University leaders and transit researchers in Atlanta (Georgia Tech) and St. Louis (Washington University)
- Mayors or Mayor's Offices in Detroit (mayor) and Atlanta
- State legislators in Michigan and Georgia
- Transit campaign consultants in Denver
- Developers in Detroit and Cleveland
- Union leader in St. Louis
- Transit providers in Detroit (SMART, DDOT, M-1 Rail)

The findings of this study were based to a significant degree on these interviews and the materials provided by these people and organizations.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over a period of 15 months during 2012 and 2013, an interdisciplinary team of six faculty members and six students at the University of Detroit Mercy studied the factors that enable and inhibit the development of effective regional transit, focusing on Metro Detroit and four peer regions, Atlanta, Cleveland, Denver and St. Louis. Various investigators examined six areas:

1. Transit Leadership and Politics
2. Transit Law and Governance
3. Transit Equity and Access
4. Transit-Oriented Development
5. Transit Finance
6. Transit Public Opinion and Media

Each major report is divided into chapters that focus on each of the six areas listed above. All of these reports are available on line at the UDM Transportation Center's website.<sup>2</sup>

This report provides the key findings related to transit leadership and politics, especially those related to successful planning and funding of regional transit. The processes described employ a metaphor of "transit stew" that emphasizes the broad variety of values and opinions (ingredients and flavors) that always exist in any major metropolitan area. This variety must be blended in ways that are responsive to each stakeholder group, allowing each group to remain faithful to their values and priorities (retain their flavor), but also willing to compromise to accommodate the values and priorities of other stakeholders (absorb and blend flavors). Such a process creates a system that provides value to all, but may not be perfect for any. In fact, a guiding principle for the entire process is "don't let perfect be the enemy of progress."<sup>3</sup>

A three-phase process is presented that starts with sharing and recognition of all stakeholders' perspectives on what they want and need from regional transit. This leads to the creation of a consensus or blended vision of regional transit in terms of characteristics, but not a system design. The second phase, translation of the blended vision into a specific transit system design and plans to develop it, must be done by transit professionals, always keeping the leaders of stakeholder groups aware and engaged, providing feedback on options being considered. Once an acceptable plan emerges, phase three involves the stakeholder leaders actively advocating for the plan and its funding through "segmented advocacy," emphasizing the specific values and impact of the plan that are most important to the specific segment of the population. Once each segment of the population sees that the plan will support their values and core objectives, funding and building of the transit system become far more likely.

The need for the creation of a very diverse and active coalition in Metro Detroit is also discussed, along with examples of the successes of coalitions in advancing transit in other studied regions as well as an example from Los Angeles – or failing to do so by not coming together in their transit stew (Atlanta).

Finally, the roles of stakeholder leaders, and special roles of government, business and educational leaders are discussed and amplified with examples from other regions, including Atlanta, Cleveland, Denver and St. Louis.

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## I. BACKGROUND: THIS STUDY

### RESEARCH FOCUS

This report focuses on the leadership and political processes needed to create reliable, efficient and affordable regional transit system and service in the Metro Detroit region. The overall study of *Factors that Inhibit and Enable Effective Regional Transit in Southeastern Michigan* was undertaken by 12 researchers from the University of Detroit Mercy (UDM), and was funded by the U.S. Department of Transportation (through the Mineta National Transit Research Consortium) and the Michigan Department of Transportation.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This report is based upon the 15-month study of leadership and politics by the two authors conducted during 2012 and 2013. The first two phases of the study were the review of extensive literature and media and many interviews on the history of Detroit transit, and similar research and visits to four comparable regions, Atlanta, Cleveland, Denver and St. Louis. This led to the release of two major reports in January 2013; each report included a chapter on issues related to leadership and politics.<sup>4</sup> The study also examined transit-related developments since 2007 through the study of literature and media and in-depth interviews of 17 leaders from transit, business and government, all leading to a third report in June 2013.<sup>5</sup> Finally, the study compared Detroit with other regions and made recommendations related to the issues of leadership and politics.<sup>6</sup> The four full reports on Detroit transit history, current developments, transit in peer regions and recommendations total 679 pages and can be found at the UDM research center's website.<sup>7</sup>

The research method employed in this study, especially the examination of leadership and politics, was highly ethnographic in nature, relying heavily on in-depth interviews of over 60 leaders in five regions, ranging from transit providers and transit board members to business, labor, education and government leaders and transit reporters. Nearly all interviews were taped and transcribed, providing a rich array of perspectives and narrative stories. These, combined with a broad review of media, yielded a mosaic of findings that are presented in this report and the reports on the other focal areas (legal/law, finance, transit-oriented development, equity/access and media/public opinion).

### NEED FOR THIS RESEARCH

For many years, efforts to develop effective regional mass transit in Metropolitan Detroit have been thwarted by a wide variety of factors. These include conflicting interests of various governmental agencies and individuals, legal barriers, funding issues, labor/jobs issues, perceptions of competing objectives of transit-oriented development and commuter service, public opinion regarding transit and spending priorities, rider concerns (and perceptions) regarding safety, and even ethnic prejudice.<sup>8</sup> For decades, efforts to integrate regional bus services have failed, leaving Southeastern Michigan (the Metropolitan Detroit Region) with three transit agencies (Suburban Mobility authority for Regional Transportation (SMART), Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT), and Ann Arbor Transportation Authority (AATA)), that serve three distinct areas of the region, and the People Mover

in downtown Detroit, with poor interfaces between them. SMART and DDOT systems are struggling financially and have within the last year cut service and considered raising fares. Initiatives to restore rail-based transit have suffered a similar fate as a privately funded initiative (for M-1 Rail) and a publicly funded study (*Detroit Transit Options for Growth Study* [DTOGS]) have failed to develop a joint project despite the honest efforts of many well-intended people from the public and private sectors, including leaders from the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) and advisors from across the nation. This study sought to learn from Detroit's history and the successes and failures of other regions in order to better understand the factors that enable and inhibit successful regional transit, and allowing the Detroit region to move forward to build such systems.



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## II. REGIONAL TRANSIT STATUS AND THE TASK AT HAND

In the foreword to the recently published book *The Metropolitan Revolution*, Judith Rodin (President of the Rockefeller Foundation) clearly defines the current reality of the region-to-city relationship:<sup>9</sup>

Often when we refer to cities we are actually referring to the broader economic, environmental, and infrastructure networks of the entire metropolitan region of which the city is a part. In this sense, it is difficult to separate the city from its larger metro region – or to separate the metro from the city. In today’s world, the two are inextricably linked.

The authors accept this definition of city as the inseparable core of the region, but believe that the broader community of Metro Detroit also needs to understand, accept and embrace it if the region and the city are to thrive in the future.

Southeast Michigan has, or can secure, all of the technical tools needed to successfully implement effective regional public transit – transit that is reliable, efficient, affordable and safe – transit that includes a variety of modes and services including local bus service, circulators, paratransit and rapid transit that operate in a cohesive and coordinated way across the region. However, these resources need to be organized and managed in ways that bring about substantive improvements to the operation of current transit assets and the development and funding of transit expansion.

Much transit system planning has already been accomplished, including the Regional Transit Coordination Committee (RTCC) Public Transit Plan, completed in 2008,<sup>10</sup> and AATA strategic plan,<sup>11</sup> and these plans have been accepted by the new Regional Transit Authority (RTA) as a first step in moving transit ahead in Metro Detroit region. In addition, transit system development has received far more attention and planned investment in the Southeastern Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG) Regional Transportation Plan, *Direction 2035*,<sup>12</sup> than it received in previous plans. These documents provide a sound planning foundation for moving ahead in regional transit development in Metro Detroit.

What is needed most is *unified will* to move forward toward a truly regional transit system, and an effective effort to direct that will in order to plan, fund, build and operate more effective *regional* transit systems. The significant element that is missing is the development of a unified working relationship between public and private leadership toward the common goal of the development of a public transit system for Southeast Michigan that substantively improves the lives of the residents and helps to strengthen the economy.

There is also a great need for strong transit advocates from diverse stakeholder segments of the community to come together to develop and support the system plan. However, as they represent their particular group or locale, with its values and priorities, there is a danger of being too inflexible, guaranteeing that agreement/consensus cannot be reached.

The Metro Detroit region does not have a good record of regionalism that brings residents and leaders from across the region together to support broad, regional goals that would benefit the entire area. However, in recent years, a seed of regionalism has germinated and sprouts of regional thinking and action have emerged. These include decisions of government agencies and voting citizens to support and sustain regional assets such as Cobo (convention) Center, the Detroit Zoo and the Detroit Institute of Arts. While these are encouraging, they reflect a desire to retain and enhance existing assets that were already valued and highly regarded.

Of course, the largest and most relevant movements toward regionalism have focused on transit: the approval of the RTCC's regional transit plan and the creation of the RTA by the State of Michigan. Recent surveys<sup>13</sup> have indicated that the majority of respondent's value transit in general, but do not have a high regard for the existing transit services in Southeast Michigan, nor a high degree of confidence in the current transit provided in the region. The public is specifically concerned about the lack of reliability of services (amplified by recent cutbacks caused by dire economic conditions in the region) and a perceived ineffective use of public funds. This lack of respect and confidence may work against the advancement of transit and fuel divisive forces whose priorities and politics are focused locally, not regionally. However, the new transit authority has the opportunity to establish a new reputation for effective, efficient operations. Also, the combination of valuing transit in general and being dissatisfied with current service may be a powerful motivator for support for emerging transit plans.

It is also important to note that divisive forces are not unique to Metro Detroit. Other regions have faced and overcome the barriers that they presented – and Metro Detroit can do so, too. While a sense of regionalism is valuable to advancing regional transit, transit leaders from all segments of the community must realize that it is not necessary to completely “solve” the barriers to regionalism to move forward with regional transit. In fact, regional transit can lead to a greater sense of and support of regionalism, if done well. The process described in the remainder of this paper is intended to guide in the development of such regional transit by both creating greater regional support for transit and overcoming barriers to regionalism. This process was derived from examining the successful and unsuccessful effort in other regions and reflecting on the current conditions in Metro Detroit. In some cases, relevant actions, leaders or political situations in other regions are briefly described and compared to those in Metro Detroit today.

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### III. REGIONAL TRANSIT STEW

The metaphor that we have chosen, “regional transit stew,” is relatively simple in its significance to the region. If we blend all of the wonderful flavors of Metro Detroit’s regional diversity using the right recipe and methods, we can create something that is far more valuable than we could create individually. The critical aspect of a stew is that each ingredient maintains its essential flavor, but blends together with all the others to create a great dish.

The ingredients of a stew are very different from one another, but individually they are not all that interesting or tasty; they are just unseasoned plates of beef or plain onions. However, when mixed together, as the stew simmers, each absorbs some of the other’s flavor creating a dish that takes on very different dimension, pleasing everyone, but every ingredient retains its individual flavor. Each loses a little but gains a lot – the essence of consensus building.

Metro Detroit was once one of the nation’s *melting pots* of diverse immigrants, who came to the area for work in the automobile industry. However, unlike the implication of the melting pot metaphor, they were not melted into “amorphous goo.” Instead, they collected in ethnic neighborhoods, retaining their flavor: their values, their religions, their priorities. Over the last century, the homogeneity of many neighborhoods has decreased and boundaries have blurred, but the diversity of values and priorities have continued or even increased as other issues have defined new differences among stakeholder groups: education, economic status, political affiliation, personal health and age. Differences between these groups and differing views on business, labor, security, community and the environment, all continue to influence residents’ views on key issues that impact all of us; issues like transit. Today, the distinct flavors of the region are not only derived from ethnic differences, but from all of these other affinities and priorities of all of these stakeholder groups. To create a *regional transit stew* that is appealing to most of these stakeholders, the recipe and cooking methods must accommodate and incorporate their flavors (views and priorities).

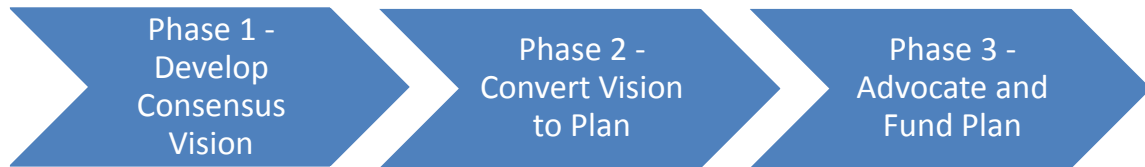
#### THREE PHASES OF COOKING REGIONAL TRANSIT STEW

The process recommended is based on the transit stew metaphor, and must be steadfastly fixed on ***two critical guiding principles***:

1. The region is naturally diverse, and the views and priorities of all major stakeholder constituents must be considered in planning and advocating for transit.
2. The overall good of the region must be the highest priority, sought by defining consensus, developing a plan that reflects that consensus, and recognizing that, because of the natural diversity of the region (or any large region), that plan will not be perfect for any one stakeholder group.

The diverse stakeholders hold the key to success of this process in defining, funding and building a system that best fits the region (see Figure 1). These stakeholders must first come together to develop a consensus vision, and then after the vision is translated into

a plan by transit professionals, actively support the plan to the constituents in their group, explaining how it serves their particular priorities and objectives, and the overall good of the region; always remembering that no plan will be viewed as perfect for any individual stakeholder group. The *mantra* during this process must always be **“Don’t let perfect be the enemy of progress.”**<sup>14</sup>



**Figure 1. The Three Phases of Creating Regional Transit Stew**

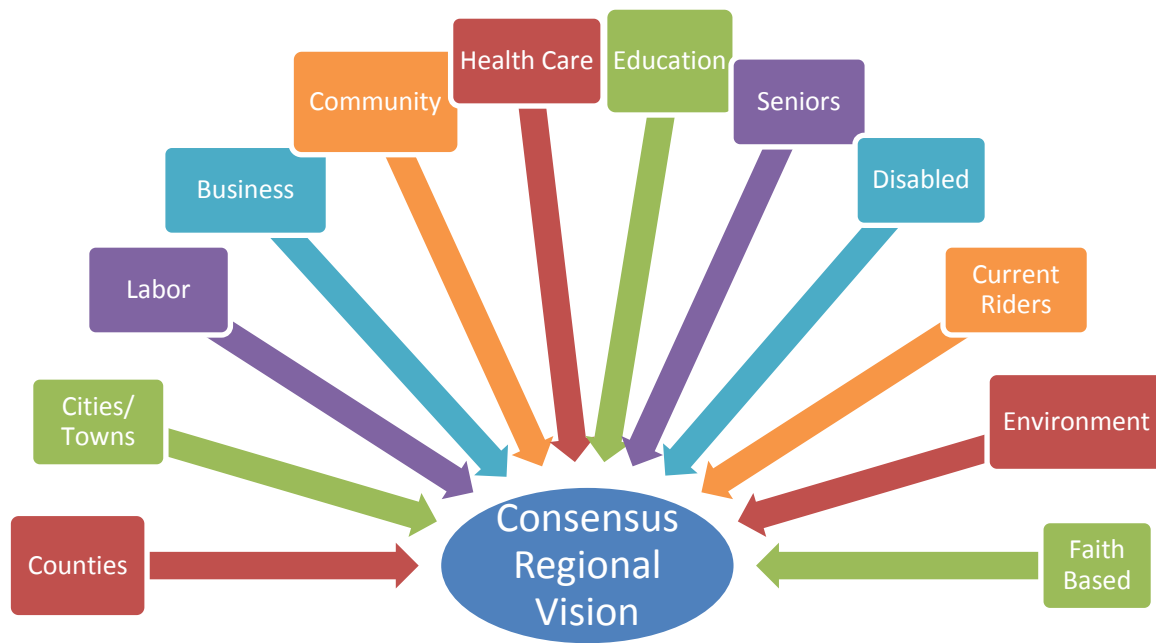
If the transit system is to be palatable to most or all of the citizens, the stakeholders need to come together to reach a consensus vision (Phase 1), the vision needs to be transformed into a Regional Transit Plan (Phase 2), and then the stakeholders need to be convinced that the plan is a good enough blend of flavors to serve both the regional needs and their priorities in order to warrant their active support (Phase 3).

## **PHASE 1: COMING TOGETHER TO DEVELOP A CONSENSUS VISION OF REGIONAL TRANSIT**

Engagement of leaders of many stakeholder groups to create a consensus vision.

Figure 2 depicts some of the key stakeholder groups with the most interest and influence in transit. Each group and its leaders have different personal priorities, objectives and values that shape their views on transit, its value, what it should look like, who it should serve, and who should pay for it. The “leaders” of these segments are sometimes clear from their titles as directors of community groups or executives in leading organizations within a stakeholder group. However, regardless of titles, nearly anyone can become the spokesperson of a stakeholder segment due to personal interest or organizational focus. It is also important that regional transit leaders, such as the Regional Transit Authority (RTA) or transit advocacy groups, identify those who would have the greatest propensity to support transit and the greatest influence on the public, and encourage them to become active leaders of their stakeholder groups. (In order to make such potential leaders more aware of the value and issues surrounding transit, the University of Detroit Mercy (UDM) Transit Team has developed a pamphlet that summarizes the key findings of this study.)

Phase 1 requires the active and committed engagement of this wide variety of stakeholder groups from across the region, as depicted in Figure 2. It should result in a *vision*, but not a specific transit *plan*. The vision should include the shared values and objectives of transit in the region, without specifying such things as routes and modes of transit. It is important that this array of stakeholders includes both the powerful leadership of the community (business, government, health care providers, etc.) and grassroots organizations (community groups, transit advocacy, environmentalist, bicyclists, faith-based organizations, etc.).



**Figure 2. Phase 1: Coming Together to Develop a Consensus Vision for Regional Transit (defining a truly exceptional dish)**

The process of development of this regional vision can be initiated by the RTA Board of Directors and its Citizen’s Advisory Committee. However, it needs to involve an even broader array of stakeholder groups. Bringing these stakeholders together will identify the leadership and members of a new regional transit advocacy group (see Phase 3, below).

The essence and goal of Phase 1 is *informed collaborative consensus*. It must include the following elements:

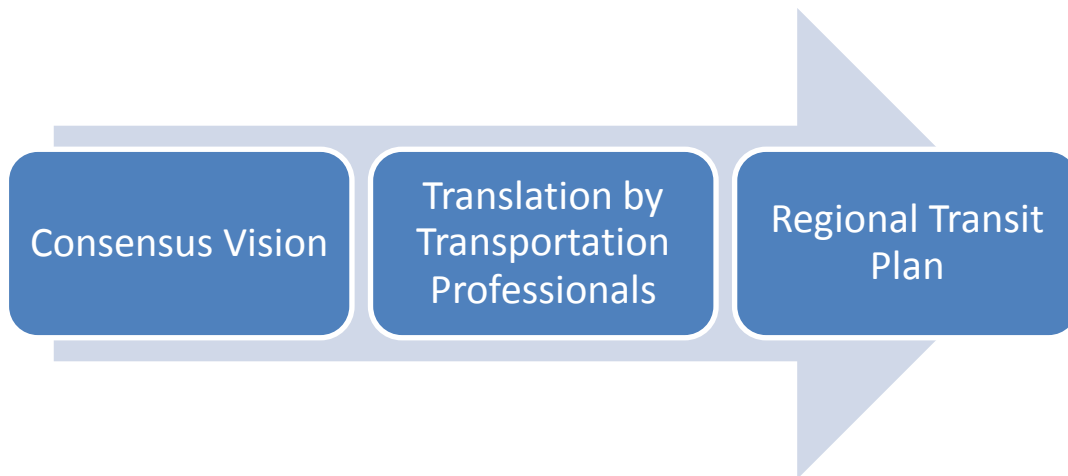
- Understanding the values, priorities and views of the constituents within the stakeholder groups.
- Representing the stakeholder group in a way that is faithful to its own constituency, yet acknowledging the greater good of the region that will come from consensus.
- Open consideration of the views and objectives of other stakeholder groups.
- Reasonable compromise, as needed to reach consensus, always remembering *don’t let the perfect be the enemy of the possible*.

(For more detailed information on the lessons learned from other regions, see two of the study team’s previous reports, *Transit Lessons for Detroit from Four Peer Regions: Atlanta, Cleveland, Denver and St. Louis* and *Detroit Regional Transit - Recommendations and Comparisons*.<sup>15</sup>)

## PHASE 2: THE TRANSLATION OF THE CONSENSUS VISION INTO A REGIONAL TRANSIT PLAN

Phase 2 must be accomplished by transit professionals with deep knowledge regarding transit vehicles and systems. The requisite competencies include the ability to define and assess various transit components, routes and systems with regard to their performance, specifications, costs and regulations, as well as ways in which they have been configured in other regions, and an ability to model and analyze their performance and impact as a system in Metro Detroit. The specific goals of the transit plan should be derived from the consensus vision of the stakeholders (Phase 1). Do the stakeholders place a high priority on new rapid transit, or is coordination of local bus services between multiple providers their top priority? Is reverse commuting a critical issue or do they favor economic development through TOD in the core city? Does polling indicate a willingness to make major strides in transit development through dramatic increases in funding, or will the public only support small steps?

Once the vision is defined, then the transportation professionals can translate it into the metric for success (ridership, economic development, etc.), and then design the transit system (Figure 3).



**Figure 3. Phase 2: Translating the Vision into a Regional Transit Plan**

*Note:* Cooking by blending the ingredients, but allowing each ingredient to maintain its essential flavor.

The authors recommend the following process for this phase:

1. Hire experienced professional transit planner(s) in the RTA.
2. Co-locate a collaborative planning group under the leadership of the RTA with representation from the five transit providers (DDOT, SMART, People Mover, AATA and M-1) and SEMCOG.
3. This group should first review and update regional transit plans, integrating the RTCC and AATA plans, and modify them to assure that they are consistent with and supportive of the consensus vision developed in Phase 1.

4. Develop a project list that is comprehensive, cohesive and financially feasible; this may include more than one viable alternative for which they would seek citizen input.
5. Review of the plan by the public and private leaders and advisory groups leading to its finalization and the first RTA funding referendum.

The study of current Detroit transit providers revealed that some of them did not have professional transit planners on their staffs. While it is valuable for each transit provider to have its own transit planning personnel, it is critical that the RTA, as the developer of the regional rapid transit plan and its rapid transit elements, and the coordinator of local services and regional transit services, have at least one experienced professional transit planner on staff. Once this has been accomplished, a truly regional transit plan can be constructed through direct collaboration among all providers and the metropolitan planning organization (SEMCOG). This is best done by co-locating planning staff from all of these organizations to encourage and enable consensus on the transit strategies and system design among all transit providers. Such a tightly coupled team can better assure consistency of the resulting regional transit *plan* with the objectives of the consensus regional transit *vision* developed in Phase 1.

This concept of full time co-location of a planning team was used successfully in Atlanta to develop a regional transit vision: In 2005-6 a regional transit institutional analysis was completed by the Transit Planning Board (TPB). TPB was a “public sector joint venture” created for two years through an intergovernmental agreement between Metropolitan Atlanta Regional Transit Authority (MARTA), Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC), and Georgia Regional Transportation Authority (GRTA). Each agency provided staff and/or grant funding (matched by MARTA and the area’s community improvement districts) to create a plan, including governance and funding. They created *Concept 3, Transportation Vision for Atlanta Region*.<sup>16</sup> In 2008, *Concept 3* was adopted by the boards of TPB, MARTA, GRTA and ARC, leading to the passage of the Transportation Improvement Act (TIA) in 2010.<sup>17</sup> TIA authorized a referendum to fund both roads and transit in 2012.

While the early stages of collaborative planning were successful and effective in developing a shared vision and an opportunity to secure funding, it stopped too soon. According to those interviewed for this research, the referendum failed due to a number of reasons, including the use of a flawed process to move from a transit vision to a transit plan. That process allowed each separate jurisdiction to request transit projects that they saw as most important. Many of these projects were identified by people with little or no transit planning expertise. Further, because they were done independently, it yielded a plan that was not only incomplete, but was a disjointed array of projects that did not fit together into an integrated transit system with the systemic improvements to regional transit service that might have occurred otherwise.

The Metro Detroit region should learn from this lesson and allow the transit professionals to first create an integrated plan for improvement that is put before leaders and the public for their input, suggestions and recommendations. Such a process will yield a much more

cohesive and comprehensive system plan that can be clearly articulated and promoted through an advocacy campaign.

The Denver FasTracks program and its campaign advertisements exemplify such clarity in promoting support for specific system improvements and expansions that would be accomplished over the life of the funding provided by the referendum that was approved in November 2004 and took effect in January of 2005.<sup>18</sup> As a result, the Denver Regional Transportation District (RTD) is now constructing 118 miles of transit that includes heavy rail, light rail and BRT components.

Finally, the transit leaders in Denver understood that all regions are aggregations of people of different political parties, different ethnicity, different lifestyles, different views on development and social equity – differences of all sorts. As a natural consequence of this diversity, everyone in a region will come to the table with diverse preexisting views on transit and many related issues, such as taxation, governance, land use and economic development. Because of this diversity of views across any significant region, *any* regional plan will be contrary, in at least some small way, to some of the values and goals of most constituents.

To be successful in developing a consensus plan that serves the priorities and values of the largest possible fraction of the population, everyone must come to the table realizing that they will not get everything in the plan that they would like. To everyone involved, the plan will *not* be *perfect*. In Denver, the RTD leaders clearly recognized this with their oft-repeated admonishment, “Don’t let the perfect be the obstacle to progress.” This acceptance of what was possible and willingness to take those smaller steps forward was also important in developing confidence of the public in the RTD’s competence as it created its first segment of light rail.

### **PHASE 3: ENDORSEMENT OF THE PLAN AND SEGMENTED ADVOCACY**

Once the plan has been developed and reviewed by the key stakeholder groups, especially the RTA Board of Directors, the RTA Citizens Advisory Committee and the regional transit advocacy coalition, the leaders of the various stakeholder groups need to actively advocate for the plan and its funding (see Figure 4). It is important that they do so as individuals, as this sends a clear message that, in the judgment of a leader who shares the region’s values and objectives, “this plan is good for our stakeholder group.” To do so most effectively, those leaders should develop and deliver those elements of the regional case statement that resonates with their stakeholder segment. Once that “segmented case” has been developed, each leader needs to become a visible and proactive advocate for regional transit within their segment and to the entire region.





**Figure 4. Phase 3: Advocacy of Regional Transit Plan by Leaders to Stakeholder Groups – Serving: presentation of the dish is important**

### **Segmentation of the Definition and Delivery of the Case for Transit**

The next step in securing support of the transit plan is to match the elements of the value proposition to the priorities and values of different community segments, and to employ the representatives of each segment to convey the case in terms that resonate with them. In other words, the case presented to each segment should be “tuned” to the values and priorities of the constituents. This tuning is done in a way that truthfully presents those elements of the plan and the impacts that are most valuable to the specific stakeholder group. In other words, it tells that group what the new transit system will accomplish that is consistent with their values and priorities. For example, for business it may provide some projected impact on bringing workers and customers to their businesses. For government leaders it may emphasize the impact on overall economic development, jobs and the tax base of municipalities and counties. For college students, it might emphasize improved services to academic institutions and entertainment venues. For seniors and those with disabilities, easy access and frequency of schedules may be important. While a good transit system plan might provide all of these, the segmented messaging that emphasizes different components and impacts for each different stakeholder group.

All of these priorities of different stakeholder groups are better understood through the execution of well-designed surveys and polls. The best way to enable and guide effective message segmentation is through detailed segmentation of public opinion from surveys. (Such a comprehensive survey is being conducted by UDM in a separate project supported by the Mineta National Transit Research Consortium.) Then, the delivery of these tailored messages to various community segments will be possible for each segment that is

represented on the coalition recommended below. (The pilot survey conducted in early 2013 indicated that while there is recognition of the value of and need for improved transit among likely voters in Southeast Michigan, there is also a low level of confidence in transit providers and a low level of satisfaction with current transit service in the region.)

Like any political campaign, advanced polling to test messages is a valuable step to be taken, often employing political consulting organizations. The Denver RTD involved consultants to assist in the testing of messages and/or development of materials prior to the campaign to pass the tax to fund FasTracks, the extensive expansion of the transit system in the Denver region. This company, CLR Associates, is experienced at advising organizations that are seeking support through public referendum. Their advice led to several decisions that contributed to the success of that referendum:

- Friends of the Denver RTD formed a 501(c)(4) (or C4) nonprofit corporation that was funded through contributions from business, and hired CLR Associates to run the advocacy campaign.
- The campaign “messages and media” were developed by CLR Associates to determine what would resonate with the various stakeholder groups and the various “publics.” Those RTD staff members and leadership who were not as expert in these areas were not allowed to alter the message or media. These messages emphasized the specific new lines and extensions that would be built, their impact on such areas as congestion, and the value of these improvements to both transit dependent riders and riders of choice.

The additional revenue from the 0.4¢ sales tax was approved in this vote (to design, build, operate and maintain the elements that were in the FasTracks plan), providing “about \$160 million per year, and, depending on the economy, we should be around \$410 million total in sales tax revenue for RTD this year and next.”<sup>19</sup>

Other consulting services, such as R&R Partners (Salt Lake City) and Avantt Partners (St. Louis), have also had great success conducting campaigns for transit referenda across the nation. In fact, the Center for Transportation Excellence reports that in recent years the success rate of transportation funding referenda across the nation has been very high; in 2012, 79% of such referenda passed.<sup>20</sup> Stories of the strategies and success of different regions were presented in the videos of the Detroit Regional Transit Workshop.<sup>21</sup>

While the messaging to the segments may include part of the case for the transit plan, the broad-based campaign media messages need to be consistent, regardless of which advocate is speaking. Leaders of various stakeholder groups need to collaborate with one another to assure a general consistency of their broad messages, even as different elements of the overall case are emphasized in the segment that they represent. It is critical that leaders do not appear to be contradicting themselves when talking to their communities and to the region. Borrowing from the principles of physics, if everyone pulls equally in different directions, there will be no motion.

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## IV. THE NEED FOR A REGIONAL ADVOCACY COALITION

[It] is clear that the real, durable reshaping [of metropolitan areas] is being led by networks of city and metropolitan leaders – mayors and other local officials, for sure, but also heads of companies, universities, medical campuses, metropolitan business associations, labor unions, civic organizations, environmental groups, cultural institutions, and philanthropies.

– Bruce Katz, *The Metropolitan Revolution: How Cities and Metros Are Fixing Our Broken Politics and Fragile Economy*

No one segment of the Metro Detroit region can, by itself, effectively advocate for regional transit funding. Effective coalitions must represent the views and perspectives of their many constituent individuals or organizations, such as business leaders and corporations, environmental groups, educational institutions, transit rider advocacy groups, providers of health services, advocates of people with disabilities, fitness/bicycling groups, minority and ethnic organizations, political parties and unions. Each of these is naturally, and sometimes legally, biased toward the unique needs and priorities of its members, and sometimes suspect by members of other organizations. As such, it is essential that the advocacy campaign be defined and guided by a very broad coalition that represents many dimensions of the regional community.

The University of Detroit Mercy (UDM) Regional Transit Team recently recommended the creation of “a broad coalition that effectively advocates for transit planning, support, ridership and development (TOD) in the Detroit Metro region.”<sup>22</sup> While the creation of yet another transit organization in this region may seem unnecessary, there is no current coalition with the needed breadth, freedom of action and broad recognition to play this important role. There are several very valuable transit-related organizations that now exist, but each has limits in breadth or action. One is Transportation Riders United (TRU), which plays an effective role in providing a voice for riders and mobilizing them in support of important legislation or referenda. However, as its name indicates, TRU represents the small segment of the population that rides the current transit (primarily bus) systems, and does not involve the powerful business leaders who have proven to be critical partners in other regions. Transportation for Michigan (Trans4M) has a somewhat broader perspective, but it is a state-wide organization. M-1 Rail has powerful business engagement, but is focused on a specific part of the regional system in Detroit, not the four-county RTA region. The RTA board is legally prohibited to advocate for funding. It is presumed that this barrier would also apply to the RTA Citizens Advisory Committee that will soon be created. All of these organizations must be heard and represent their constituent members, but no organization yet exists to bring all the necessary voices together and to work through compromise to consensus.



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## V. LESSONS FROM OTHER REGIONS

Four regions, Atlanta, Cleveland, Denver and St. Louis, were selected as being the closest peers to Metro Detroit, and visited and examined in great depth. Of these, St. Louis and Atlanta provide valuable lessons in the use (or absence) of such broad coalitions. In addition, Los Angeles also offers interesting lessons.

### **MOVELA, LOS ANGELES**

For the past few decades, Los Angeles, a region with a history of “car/freeway culture” similar to Detroit, has been expanding its transit system. In November 2008, Measure R was approved by a two-thirds majority, providing a projected \$40 billion to traffic relief and transportation upgrades over the next 30 years.<sup>23</sup> Before the successful passage of the Measure R referendum in 2008, a broad coalition of community leaders was developed through the leadership of Denny Zane, an ex-mayor of Santa Monica. That coalition is now called MoveLA. MoveLA brought together over 175 organizations (known as the 30-10 Campaign Partners) to support and deliver that campaign, including environmental and transportation groups (29 groups), cultural and community organizations, including foundations (30), labor (17), businesses (44) and business organizations (54).<sup>24</sup> In addition to the 30-10 group, MoveLA counts 37 partners in its Regional Planning and TOD group plus 55 in its Financial Partners group.<sup>25</sup>

One obvious lesson is that a diverse coalition of powerful community organizations and leaders can play a central role in securing very large funding commitments from the general public, even in regions that are not traditional “transit towns.” The second lesson is that it takes the right leader, such as the ex-mayor of a large city in the region, to bring such a group together.

### **CITIZENS FOR MODERN TRANSIT, ST. LOUIS**

The energy and will to continually advance the “ground game” for planning and funding are critical to success. One good example of such leadership is the efforts of John Nations to develop and lead a coalition of supporters in St. Louis, that resulted in the successful funding referendum in 2010 (after a similar referendum failed two years earlier). In fact, this occurred while he was the Mayor of Chesterfield (a suburb of St. Louis), just before his selection as CEO and President of St. Louis Metro. In this campaign he partnered with a transit advocacy group that focuses on TOD, Citizens for Modern Transit (CMT) and, for the educational elements, with the Metro Transit staff. With input from many partners, the community was “sliced” into its different stakeholder groups, as in our stew, each one defining a dimension of the community. These included business, church, education, union, community organizations, health care, environmental, fitness/bicycling and elected officials. In each dimension, individual organizations were identified and, for that organization, the key leaders or spokesperson specified and, wherever possible, their position on the transit referendum gaged. Then, a specific member of the coalition was identified to engage that person to provide the case for the referendum and, if possible, secure either a statement of support or their active participation in the campaign. In the end, this “ground game” was

a key element in securing approval of the referendum that raised the sales tax in the midst of a downturned economy in 2010.

In addition to the need for a ground game with extensive volunteer engagement and attention to detail, CMT provides a good example of collaboration between the regional transit authority in St. Louis (Metro) and the advocacy group, with synergistic delivery of the education program by Metro and the advocacy campaign by CMT. In Metro Detroit, it is essential that such coordination occur between the new organization recommended here and the RTA and its Citizens' Advisory Committee.

## **THE ABSENCE OF A BROAD COALITION, ATLANTA**

On July 31, 2012, a funding referendum for a combination of highway and transit investments in the Atlanta region failed by a two to one ratio. While there are many strongly held opinions around Atlanta as to why that failure occurred, it is clear that the lack of a well-developed and organized coalition to support the referendum was a significant contributing factor.<sup>26</sup> The pro-transit campaign was run by the Chamber of Commerce, without a broad coalition. In fact, some organizations that typically are pro-transit, including the Sierra Club and some chapters of the NAACP, became aligned with some typically anti-transit organizations, including the Tea Party. This unlikely opposing team even held joint press conferences to promote voting against the referendum. A more effective effort, involving more listening to community needs and reflecting them in the ultimate mix of projects to be supported by the new funds, might have drawn more organizations like the Sierra Club and the NAACP into being members of a supporting coalition.

The error of this campaign being run by business leaders was put into crisp and clear focus by a member of the Georgia State Legislature as follows:<sup>27</sup>

Businesses can fund the campaign, but businesses don't vote, people do. Business provided the support. But our campaign failed because it was driven by business people that didn't understand how to run a ground game. Business community needed to cultivate political officials on the ground. But the "money people" should be used for the money; they do not get to drive political decisions. The people that you hire to make your political decisions need to actually reflect the people that you're trying to get to. So, hiring old, white people to convince young, black people to vote is a bad idea. Yet we spent an extraordinary sum of money doing that. Hiring suburban Republicans to convince urban Democrats won't work either.

The lesson here is that an effective funding campaign should not be initiated or driven by one narrow element of the community, such as the Chamber of Commerce, but by a coalition that should be developed early in the process. However, it is important to understand that such a coalition probably does not have the experience or expertise to run a funding campaign by itself. The involvement of consultants with experience in such campaigns has proven helpful in other regions, such as Denver.<sup>28</sup>

If there is to be a successful funding vote in the RTA four-county Metro Detroit region in November 2014, the building of that coalition should begin immediately.

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## VI. ROLES OF STAKEHOLDER LEADERS

### ALL STAKEHOLDER LEADERS

All stakeholder leaders have several roles to play if their advocacy is to lead to effective, efficient transit for all. These can be summarized as (1) representing their groups/constituencies, but not in such a rigid and inflexible way that precludes any chance of consensus across the region, (2) sharing in the leadership of the combined advocacy group, (3) supporting the agreed to common and consistent vision, and (4) segmented advocacy that tunes the pro-transit advocacy messages to the values and priorities of their group/constituency.

Although the role of balancing representation of one's affinity group while reasonably seeking consensus of the transit plan was discussed early in this report, it bears repeating, since it is absolutely essential if the leaders of diverse interests are to work effectively together to accomplish a common transit vision and the needed support for the plan to achieve that vision. In the past, the inflexibility of key stakeholders has blocked regional agreement on transit, with devastating impact. In the mid- to late-1980s, lack of agreement between city and suburban leaders on the design of a rail-based transit system and on the absorption of transit providers into the regional authority, Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority (SEMTA), led to the loss of nearly \$500 million in previously committed federal funds and the dissolution of SEMTA.<sup>29</sup>

The advocacy group and campaign must also be defined by shared leadership and control. If one group dominates, the resulting message of the campaign will not be broadly defined such that the transit plan is appealing to the majority of voters. The balanced leadership resulting in the successful campaigns in St. Louis (2010) and Los Angeles (2008) are described above. In the unsuccessful campaign in Atlanta (2012), the business community seems to have taken too heavy a role in the campaign, to the exclusion of other segments.

Consistency and clarity of the representation of the main elements of the transit plan, its investments and impacts must be supported, and consistently and clearly articulated, by all leaders of the transit advocacy campaign, regardless of the stakeholder groups they represent. Inconsistency in describing the plan will lead to loss in faith in the transit plan and transit providers. Such inconsistency was a contributing factor to the failed funding referendum in St. Louis in 2008, when Citizens for Modern Transit (CMT) promised more than the plan provided.<sup>30</sup> By contrast, the campaign for the FasTracks plan in Denver in 2004 was clear and precise regarding what would be built – and the referendum passed.

While the representation of the transit plan by the various leaders of all stakeholder groups must remain consistent, it is important that each leader emphasize the impacts that transit investments will have on the specific priorities and values that are held highest by citizens in each stakeholder group. See the discussion of “segmented advocacy” in the Phase 3 section, above, for a discussion of this.

In addition to these common roles that all leaders of various stakeholder groups must fulfill, there are some special roles that leaders from specific segments need to take on

to help assure successful planning and funding of regional transit. The special roles of leaders from government, business and education are discussed below.

### **GOVERNMENT LEADERS: DEVELOP A UNIFIED VISION AND VOICE FOR TRANSIT**

Government leaders have special influence over transit decisions by virtue of their being elected representatives of the people. They have extensive access to the press and their opinions carry a lot of weight with their constituents.

In other regions, mayors, individually or collectively, often have great influence over the success of transit planning and funding. In 2010, John Nations, the Republican Mayor of suburban Chesterfield, led the successful pro-transit campaign, which was a combination of very old-fashioned and very modern campaigning.<sup>31</sup> In 2004, prior to the referendum to fund Denver's FasTracks transit plan, the 31-member Metro Mayor's Caucus unanimously endorsed the plan and actively campaigned for its support. That vote was successful, and now 118 miles of heavy rail, light rail and bus-rapid-transit are under construction in the Denver region.

### **BUSINESS LEADERS: SPEAK OUT AND FINANCIALLY SUPPORT TRANSIT**

Business leaders play two important roles in the planning and advocacy of regional transit, as highly respected opinion leaders and the most likely source of funding for campaigns. How well key business leaders have taken on these roles in other regions has proven to be pivotal in effectively advancing regional transit in other urban regions.

One example of effective support is the campaign leadership of Dr. Delos "Toby."



**Figure 5. View Along Cleveland's HealthLine BRT Route**

*Source:* Euclid Ave. Authors' photo, 2012.



Cosgrove for the HealthLine funding in Cleveland. Cosgrove is President and CEO of the Cleveland Clinic, presiding over a \$5 billion health care system, widely regarded as the *800-pound gorilla* in Cleveland.<sup>32</sup> Dr. Cosgrove played off of his specialty as a cardiologist to create a very imaginative television promotion based on the need for both people and cities to have healthy arteries. Of course, the artery that he was referring to was the city's artery, Euclid Avenue (Figure 5), and the HealthLine BRT system was the way Cleveland was "reconstructing an artery that is great for the heart of our city." Through this campaign, he became the most visible "public face," lending the enormous influence of the Cleveland Clinic and himself to the case for building the system.

The Cleveland Clinic was also a co-sponsor of the branding of the Euclid BRT line as HealthLine, providing a first-class image, in addition to funding of the campaign and creation Cleveland's BRT line.

Such funding of campaigns for referenda by business is essential because other organizations with "deep pockets," such as government agencies and foundations, are prohibited by law from supporting advocacy campaigns for transit funding. So, without support from government and foundations, there are few sources except businesses and business leaders with the capacity to support transit campaigns.

Closer to home, M-1 Rail has benefitted from extensive advocacy and support from Detroit's top business leaders that reached unprecedented levels. This was recognized by Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood when he visited Detroit on January 18, 2013. "This is going to be in the history books," LaHood said at the press conference. "No other city in America has had their business community come together and raise \$100 million dollars."<sup>33</sup>

## **ACADEMIC LEADERS: MOBILIZE STUDENTS FOR THE CAMPAIGN AND PROVIDE UNBIASED STUDIES**

Like the government and business leaders, academic leaders have unique assets to bring to and roles to play in transit planning and funding. The academic community embraces a mission of making the world a better place, instilling in their students an optimistic belief that they can personally change the world. As such, students provide a powerful resource for educational and advocacy campaigns. One good example of this role is the 2010 transit funding campaign in St. Louis, where students from Washington University and other area universities took on active roles in the campaign. Dianne Williams, Director of Communications at St. Louis Metro described it, "All the universities formed a group...and they worked together on the campaign...were active, were wearing buttons that they had created. There was a grassroots kind of groundswell." The Chancellor of "Wash. U." was even the chairman of the campaign.<sup>34</sup>

The academic leaders can also play the special roles of providing unbiased studies of various transit-related issues, ranging from public policy and public opinion to strategies for funding and economic development. In Atlanta, Georgia Tech has attracted past leaders of public transit and regional planning organizations, Catherine Ross (past executive director of the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority) and Harry West (past director of

the Atlanta Regional Commission), to join with faculty members in the Center for Quality Growth and Regional Development.<sup>35</sup> Such combinations of scholarship, with extensive “front line” experience, create a powerful resource for developing well-informed studies focused on the most critical issues of transit and community development.

The University of Detroit Mercy’s Transportation Center is currently engaged in five research and educational projects aimed at providing such unbiased information and new transportation professionals to serve the transit needs of Metro Detroit.

## VII. CONCLUSION

There is strong evidence that a diverse coalition of leaders from many stakeholder groups can overcome the myriad barriers to regional cooperation, and yield dramatic advances in effective regional transit that support the region's overall vitality and health. Data from many regions across the nation have supported the adage "a rising tide floats all boats," as regions realized that the wellbeing of core cities and their suburban neighbors are inextricably linked.<sup>36</sup> In fact, given the state of the economy and the inability and unwillingness of the federal government to advance programs to develop our nation's urban regions (where we find two-thirds of our people and produce three-fourths of our GDP), it is up to such regional coalitions to define and deliver on the actions needed for regional vitality. Katz and Bradley refer to such coalitions as a "pragmatic caucus," and describe their potential:<sup>37</sup>

Members of this pragmatic caucus share common traits. They are impatient. They do not tolerate ideological nonsense or political bromides. They are frustrated with gridlock and inaction. They bristle at conventional pessimism and focus on constructive optimism. They are risk takers. They do not have partisan allegiance; they have a political attitude.

In Metro Detroit, such coalitions are beginning to emerge around transit as a regional need and a powerful engine for regional and economic development. If these leaders work well together as "pragmatic caucuses," the resulting transit systems may well fulfill the promise of efficient, reliable service to riders and improved vitality and livability of the region to the benefit of all citizens of Southeast Michigan.



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## ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

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AATA	Ann Arbor Transportation Authority
ARC	Atlanta Regional Commission
BRT	Bus Rapid Transit
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CMT	Citizens for Modern Transit
DDOT	Detroit Department of Transportation
DTOGS	Detroit Transit Options for Growth Study
FTA	Federal Transit Administration
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GRTA	Georgia Regional Transportation Authority
M-1 Rail	Streetcar line along Woodward Avenue in Detroit Michigan
MARTA	Metropolitan Atlanta Regional Transit Authority
MDOT	Michigan Department of Transportation
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
RTA	Regional Transit Authority
RTCC	Regional Transit Coordination Committee
RTD	Regional Transportation District, Denver
SEMCOG	Southeastern Michigan Council of Governments
SEMTA	Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority
SMART	Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation
TIA	Transportation Improvement Act
TOD	Transit-Oriented Development
TPB	Transit Planning Board
Trans4M	Transportation for Michigan
TRU	Transportation Riders United
UDM	University of Detroit Mercy

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