

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

Detroit Regional Transit Legal Structures and Governance

One of seven final reports resulting from this project.



MNTRC Report 12-22



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During the course of this 15-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 of 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 in 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

Effective governance of transit systems is created through a qualified, representative, informed, diverse and committed board of directors, which is ultimately accountable for the financial performance and quality of the service of the transit system in the designated region. The recent enactment and effectiveness of Act 387, Public Acts 2012 creating the Regional Transit Authority of Southeast Michigan (RTA) included many of the most important elements of successful governance.¹ However, the RTA will not, initially, own and operate the existing systems in the Southeast Michigan region. So long as the existing authorities or city departments operate transit systems in the region, they too should strive to achieve optimum governance structures.

In addition, active and engaged citizens advising boards are not only essential pre-conditions for certain federal grants, they are also essential in providing valuable input relating to the quality and efficiency of services.

This summary report provides a brief overview of the best governance practices utilized by the independent transit authorities in the four peer regions visited by the researchers.

I. BACKGROUND

RESEARCH FOCUS

This report focuses on the elements of governance needed to create a reliable, efficient and affordable regional transportation system and service in the Metro Detroit region. The overall study of *Factors that Inhibit and Enable Effective Development of Sustainable Regional Transit in Southeastern Michigan* was undertaken by 12 researchers from the University of Detroit Mercy (UDM), and was funded by the United States Department of Transportation and the Michigan Department of Transportation. The extended team of researchers visited four comparable regions, Atlanta, Cleveland, Denver and St. Louis.

The author personally visited three of the four regions with members of the team. He participated in conferences with transit leaders, listed in the acknowledgements above, in Atlanta, Cleveland, and St. Louis, and he reviewed transcripts of conferences attended by the team in Denver, the one area he was unable to visit. He collected and reviewed controlling governance documents, both from individuals and from web sites applicable to all four regions. He also researched the governing statutes in each of the four regions, and carefully reviewed records of meetings of the transit authorities. Following those visits the author participated in team conferences with representatives of Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT), Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation (SMART), and the Regional Transit Authority (RTA) as well as the mayor of the City of Detroit. The author collected and reviewed all governing statutes and documents of DDOT, SMART, the RTA, the Detroit Transportation Corporation, and the Ann Arbor Transit Authority (AATA), as well as minutes of meetings of those authorities. Also in preparing these reports, the author relied on his general knowledge of effective governance collected in his 40 years of private law practice and 10 years as a professor at the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law, teaching courses in corporate law and corporate governance.

For many years, efforts to develop effective regional mass transit in metropolitan Detroit have been thwarted by a wide variety of factors. These have included conflicting interests of various governmental authorities, including elected or appointed individuals, legal barriers, funding issues, labor/jobs issues, perceptions of competing objectives of transit-oriented development and commuter service, public opinion regarding transit and even spending priorities, rider concerns (and perceptions) regarding safety, as well as, to a certain degree, ethnic prejudice. For decades, efforts to integrate regional bus service have failed leaving Southeast Michigan (the Metro Detroit region) with three transit agencies (SMART, DDOT and AATA), which serve three distinct areas of the region, with poor coordination among them. While SMART functions as an authority with an accountable board of directors, consisting of representatives of municipalities within its service area, DDOT functions as a department of the City of Detroit.

This study has attempted to learn from Detroit's history and from both successes and failures of other regions in order to better understand the governance factors that enable and inhibit successful regional transit. Only after such an understanding will the Metro Detroit region have the tools to move forward to build such systems. During the course of the project, the Metro Detroit region made significant progress toward appropriate

governance as a result of the enactment and effectiveness of Act 387, Public Acts of 2012, creating a Regional Transit Authority for Southeast Michigan (RTA).²

The RTA legislation includes enlightened provisions for effective transit governance by creating a qualified and representative board of 10 persons (which is appropriate for a working fiduciary board with access to appointed advisory boards of much larger size and diverse representation), with clear responsibilities and accountability for service within the region.³ This development significantly reduced the number of recommendations that the author otherwise would have made in completing this project.

II. ELEMENTS OF SUCCESSFUL REGIONAL TRANSIT GOVERNANCE

A study of the governance structures of the four regions selected (Atlanta, Cleveland, Denver and St. Louis) clearly indicates that successful regional transit systems are (a) owned and operated by statutorily created independent transit authorities and (b) depend on oversight from a fiduciary board with a trans-regional perspective and with accountability for the quality, efficiency, financial performance and success of the system. A more detailed description of the governance structure of each of the four regions visited is set forth in Appendix A. This governance structure, which takes its form from the governance structure in corporate America, is working well in the four regions. These boards, created by a statute, have some, or most, of the following characteristics:

1. The members of the Board have special qualifications that bring important skill sets to the dynamics of the board. Good boards have, from among its memberships, people with financial expertise, legal and accounting skills, business backgrounds, transit and transportation experience, or related qualifications. In three of the four cases (Cleveland being the exception), effective boards are composed of persons independent from the municipalities served by the region. This enhances a regional, rather than parochial, focus of the board.
2. Board members are representative of the entire region covered by the transit system, accomplished to the extent practical without expanding the size of the board to an unworkable number. In some regions this is required by statutory mandate.
3. Educational efforts are undertaken to assure that Board members (a) maintain a working knowledge and familiarity with issues involving successful transit and (b) understand the fiduciary and oversight responsibilities of the Board.
4. Efforts are made to assure that the Board is diverse in terms of gender, race and ethnic background, reflective of the community served. In at least three of the regions studied, this was accomplished.
5. Finally, the Board must be committed. Although in all cases studied, boards are not paid for services but generally are reimbursed for expenses. This is facilitated through governance documents requiring regular meetings, participation on committees, and attendance expectations.

The following are some of the specific responsibilities of effective governing bodies in addition to their decision making and general oversight responsibilities:

1. The governing documents, or statutory authority, should make clear that the governing board has ultimate responsibility for the financial performance of the system and the integrity of the financial reporting systems. This is often accomplished through the creation of finance and audit committees of the board responsible for oversight of those specific areas.

2. The governing board should review, approve and monitor major issues involving the operations of the authority, including transit routes, fare structure and the quality of the service. Quality of service could be measured by performance against benchmarks created by comparison to other successful regional transit agencies, covering issues such as pullout rates, on-time arrivals, fare box revenues and miles per breakdown.
3. The governing board must have responsibility for the hiring and retention of key management personnel, the review of performance of key personnel and the establishing of appropriate compensation.

The above elements of board structure, composition and responsibilities are customary in successful fiduciary oversight and governance of the four peer regions studied. Most of these elements are carried over from governance elements customary in corporate America, with appropriate modifications to reflect the specific characteristics of the regional transit system governed.

III. EFFECTIVE STRUCTURE AND PROCESS

Effective boards have characteristics covering three areas: optimum membership size, clear governance documents to guide their actions, and a clear separation of duties from the day to day operation of the transit system. Each of the four peer regions reviewed for the most part, have adopted and function under these guiding characteristics.

1. The most effective boards observed during this study ranged in number from 10 to 18. As in the corporate world, it has been learned that boards exceeding 15 or more tend to become unwieldy and inefficient in the decision making process. Larger boards, however, can govern effectively through significant use of a committee structure which assumes the responsibility in specific areas such as finance, audit, compensation and risk management. As transit governing boards have the benefit of these larger advisory boards, they have the luxury of being smaller, if such can practically be accomplished.
2. The governance documents should call for regular meetings of the board, not less than quarterly, with committee meetings at the time of or in between board meetings. Notices of the meetings should be served in accordance with governing bylaws adopted by the board. Agendas with supporting documents should be circulated to the board members well in advance of meetings so that each will have time to prepare and be informed of all items at the time of the meeting.
3. While the board should review and approve a detailed organization chart of the organization, it should refrain from active involvement in the day to day operation of the transit system. Day-to-day management responsibility, as opposed to the oversight and accountability responsibilities set forth above, should be left to professional managers hired by the system.⁴

To be effective, governing boards must be efficient, cohesive and committed. They must operate consistently with the detailed governance documents and must understand and abide by delineated lines that separate governance from management responsibilities.

IV. TRANSPARENCY

Because the governing Boards of the Authorities are public bodies, all of the activities of the Board should be totally transparent. Schedules of meetings, agendas, and minutes of prior meetings should be posted on accessible web sites. Governing documents, such as the authorizing legislation, bylaws and financial reports, should also be posted there. Meetings should be held in locations convenient to the public, which should be welcome at all such meetings, other than those held in non-public sessions as appropriate or permitted by applicable legislation. Appropriate matters for private sessions include discussions of threatened or pending litigation, employment and personnel matters.

V. CITIZENS ADVISORY BOARD

The tension between (a) creating an efficient Board limited in size and (b) the necessity of having representation from the region served by the transit system, can be alleviated by creating diverse non-fiduciary advisory boards comprised substantially of users of the transit system. These boards, appointed by the fiduciary governing board to assure balanced representation from the entire region, are designed to provide citizen comments on the performance of the system, on a systematic basis. In the RTA Act, the creation of a citizens advisory committee, and a smaller and more limited in scope advisory council, are mandated by statute and intended to provide: (a) a vehicle for compliance with federal requirements for advisory activities relating to access and utilization of transit systems by the elderly and disabled, and (b) a sounding board and recommendation body for better service in the community. These and similar boards in other regions are limited in authority to making recommendations. They are also useful in increasing the profile of the transit system as it strives to accomplish ridership goals and obtain financial support.

VI. CONCLUSION

Analysis of the best elements of successful governance in the four areas observed concludes that the governance provisions contained in the RTA enabling-legislation go a long way to achieving an effective governance structure. The Act, which includes provisions for qualifications, regional representation, appropriate size and clear delineation of responsibilities, achieves its purpose. While the RTA does not, at this time, actually operate any systems, it should provide a model for the systems operating under its jurisdiction.

Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT) would benefit greatly from oversight from a diverse and qualified fiduciary board representative of the Detroit community with special skill sets to contribute to the governance process. This can be accomplished, of course, if DDOT is “spun off” to an independent authority, or to the Detroit Transportation Corporation (DTC), which owns and operates the Detroit People Mover. DDOT should then amend its articles of incorporation to diversify its board, which now is composed of five City of Detroit employees and one Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation (SMART) designee. The goal would be for the combined DDOT and DTC to provide business, financial and leadership skills and backgrounds, either indirectly or through a board of directors comprised of unaffiliated persons.

With regard to the other transit authorities under the umbrella of the RTA in the region, including specifically SMART, it is not recommended that their structure be revised or their board representation materially modified. It is recommended that those agencies should strive to achieve representation on their own boards with independent persons with the qualifications and skills as outlined in the RTA enabling-legislation.

APPENDIX A: NOTES CONCERNING GOVERNING BOARD STRUCTURES OF STUDIED PEER REGIONS

CLEVELAND, OHIO

Cleveland has a 10-person Board, four of whom are appointed by the Mayor of Cleveland (with approval of the Cleveland City Council) and must be Cleveland residents; three members are elected by a complex procedure at a meeting of the Mayors and City Managers of all municipal corporations other than Cleveland and within Cuyahoga County (with votes weighted in proportion to population); and three members are appointed by the Cuyahoga Executive and approved by the Cuyahoga Council. At least one of those three appointees must be a resident of the city of Cleveland. Terms are “staggered” three year terms, such that each year the terms of three or four members of the Board will expire. The statute does not set forth any specific criteria in terms of expertise or experience as a qualification for Board membership. Board members may be removed only for misfeasance, nonfeasance or malfeasance in office.

ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

St. Louis has 10 commissioners. The five Missouri Board members are appointed by the Governor of the State of Missouri. In Illinois two are appointed by the Governor of the State of Illinois, two are appointed by the Madison County Board Chairman and one is appointed by the St. Clair County Board Chairman. Terms are staggered such that each year one member of the Commission in both Illinois and Missouri are subject to replacement or reappointment. No provision for removal of a commissioner was found in either the statute or the Collected Board Policies.

ATLANTA, GEORGIA

The Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) Board of Trustees is composed of 11 voting members and one non-voting member, ten of whom represent the city of Atlanta, Fulton County and DeKalb County and two members are “ex-officio,” representing the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority (GRTA) and the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT). All positions are appointed directly by the organizations they represent (Atlanta – three members; Fulton County – three members; and DeKalb County – four members). The executive director of GRTA is the sole non-voting member. Board members can be removed only for “cause.”

DENVER, COLORADO

Denver has a 15-member publicly elected Board of Directors. The Directors are elected to four year terms and each represents a specific district as provided in the enabling legislation. Terms are staggered so that eight seats are open in one general election (held every two years) and seven in the next. Denver Directors may only be removed by voter recall.

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

AATA	Ann Arbor Transportation Authority
DDOT	Detroit Department of Transportation
GDOT	Georgia Department of Transportation
GRTA	Georgia Regional Transportation Authority
M-1 Rail	Streetcar line along Woodward Avenue in Detroit Michigan
MARTA	Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority
MDOT	Michigan Department of Transportation
RTA	Regional Transit Authority
SEMCOG	Southeast Michigan Council of Governments
SMART	Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation
UDM	University of Detroit, Michigan
US DOT	U.S. Department of Transportation

ENDNOTES

1. State of Michigan, *Regional Transit Authority Act; Act 387 of 2012* (December 19, 2012), State of Michigan Legislature (web site), <http://www.legislature.mi.gov/documents/2011-2012/publicact/htm/2012-PA-0387.htm> (accessed December 24, 2013).
2. State of Michigan, *Act 387*.
3. John F. Olson and Michael T. Adams, "Composing a Balanced and Effective Board to Meet New Governance Mandates," *The Business Lawyer* 59 (2004): 421.
4. The conclusions reached in this and the prior section were aided in part through conversations with Forest Graham, Attorney for MARTA, Joseph A. Calabrese, Cleveland RTA CEO and general manager, and Larry Salci, a transit consultant with prior executive experience in St. Louis and Michigan.

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Lloyd A. Semple is a professor at the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law. Professor Semple served as Dean of the School of Law from 2009 to 2013. Before joining the School of Law in 2004 he practiced corporate and business law with Dykema Gossett, a 400-lawyer Detroit based national law firm. While at Dykema he served as its Chairman and CEO (from 1995 to 2002) and was a member of boards of directors of several business entities and charitable organizations. One of those organizations was Metropolitan Affairs Coalition, an affiliate of SEMCOG which, among other things, produced an in-depth study of the feasibility of bus rapid transit in Southeast Michigan.

PEER REVIEW

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