

CRAIN'S DETROIT BUSINESS

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Transportation

Mayor and Council –

FYI, as a reminder service started this past Monday. I have another meeting with representatives with SMART tomorrow (Friday 9/15). More to come on their potential offerings

- Victor

Public transit faces long road ahead in Oakland County

By Dustin Walsh



Oakland County residents went from NIMBYs to YIMBYs in November by approving a millage to open up access to Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation (SMART) bus routes across the county.

SMART extended several routes this month opening up access to critical employers, including Ascension Providence Novi and Twelve Oaks Mall. The regional system even

added new stops, including one at Woodward Avenue and Long Lake Road in Bloomfield Hills where there hadn't been any stops before.

While outside experts applaud the new connections, they say the extensions and additions remain a Band-Aid on the region's broken public transportation system.

Voters OK'd a 10-year, 0.95-mill property tax in November to fund the SMART expansion. The millage costs the owner of a home with a market value of \$300,000 about \$140 a year.

It was a do-or-die gamble the Oakland County Board of Commissioners made in August when it voted to end the opt-out provision that has provided for a patchwork of SMART service across the county. Prior to the vote, some communities participated in SMART services and others did not, leaving roughly 1.27 million residents without a major bus service for at least a decade.

Now, SMART's expansion is connecting those far-flung regions, at least to the city of Detroit.

Harmony Lloyd, vice president of planning and innovation for SMART, said the route extensions reflect where the transit system had the most demand.

"We repeatedly heard about those currently using those routes having to walk to get to Twelve Oaks Mall and other retailers after getting off at the Farmington Hills border (with Novi)," Lloyd said. "Anecdotally we knew it was a big issue. That line is heavy with retail, restaurants and hospitals. There's so much opportunity for people who make that \$10 to \$25 an hour wage who are grateful to have a bus to get to work."

Mike Badali, regional COO for Ascension Michigan's metro Detroit West region, said bus service to Ascension Providence increases health care access.

"A new bus stop near Ascension Providence Hospital in Novi will facilitate easier access to our health care facilities, especially for patients who need medical care and services," Badali said. "This will also provide associates with another mode of transportation to and from work."

Lloyd said the Grand River Avenue route, which now extends from the Old Redford Meijer at Grand River and McNichols Road to the Fifth Third Bank on Grand River Avenue and 12 Mile Road in Wixom, has roughly 6,000 monthly riders.

The now extended 12 Mile route, which goes from 13 Mile and Flora Road in Roseville to the Fifth Third in Wixom, serves 14,000 riders per month.

(We will be asking for monthly data sets)

Robert Pfaff, a public transit researcher, visiting assistant professor at Cleveland State University and native metro Detroiter, said the regional transportation system's structure isn't conducive to efficient transportation.

"Imagine if you live Downriver and you want to get to Twelve Oaks; there's no direct route," Pfaff said. "If you take the bus, you've got to go into the city and then back out to where you want to go. There are no external regional connectors. Job flow is not just in and out of the city (of Detroit)."

Joanna Ganning, associate dean of faculty research, development and administration in Cleveland State's public affairs department, told Crain's there are no legitimate studies documenting labor force participation and bus access. She said many bus route extensions appear to be driven by labor demand for business owners that don't fully consider the reliability of cash-strapped transit systems.

"We don't know if these are the destinations riders would prefer," Ganning said. "Really, adding a bunch of new stops doesn't take into account whether traveling those routes are even efficient for the riders. Does it enhance their quality of life?"

The SMART schedule shows the route from Meijer in Old Redford is about 49 minutes. But [Crain's reporters have taken that route](#) in the past when it stopped several miles short in Farmington Hills and the route took nearly two hours.

"If you're a worker, how do you plan for an unpredictable ride?" Ganning said. "There has to be meaningful investment, not just going to the mall, to make these options effective."

SMART is also facing an [ongoing bus driver shortage](#), which has stalled its further expansion across Oakland County, said Lloyd.

"We're looking at ways we could expand, but we have to be able to deliver the services within our current capacity," Lloyd said. "We chose these routes because they were already in existence, we were able to expand them and make them a little bit longer without having to add additional drivers and equipment."

Lloyd said SMART is looking to hire up to 100 new drivers statewide. It needs upwards of 15 new drivers to continue expansion into Oakland County alone.

Ganning said much of the region's transportation problem is exacerbated by big employers like Amazon building new operations on greenfield sites in the far reaches of metro Detroit, who then put expectations on the transit authorities to provide routes to get workers to them.

"These transit systems were built to serve a much smaller footprint than what needs to be served today," she said. "It's grotesquely unfair to blame these issues on transit authorities given smaller and smaller budgets and more political shifts."

By **Dustin Walsh**

Dustin Walsh is a senior reporter for Crain's Detroit Business, covering health care with a focus on industry change and operations, as well as the state's emerging cannabis industry. He is also a regular columnist on all things health, labor, economics and more.

 Transportation, News, Oakland County, Politics & Policy

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