
Gilmartin: It's time to accelerate transit investments

Public, private funds needed for improvements

By Dan Gilmartin

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Led by the business community, local elected officials and forward-thinking state lawmakers, momentum is building across Michigan to significantly expand public transit.

Why now? Rising energy costs, worsening road congestion and curbing air pollution are contributing factors. The biggest motivators, however, are jobs and economic development. Every major U.S. urban area that has embraced transit in the past two decades has gained thousands of transit-related jobs and billions of dollars in commercial, residential and infrastructure development near their transit stations. Apartments and condominiums, office buildings, restaurants, pubs and cafes, movie theaters, art centers, and retail shops are developing near the stops. The story is the same in Dallas, Charlotte, St. Louis, Minneapolis and Portland.

Communities with real transit systems - buses and rail working together - are also places where young, college-educated people are increasingly choosing to live, work and play. Michigan currently has no such community.

Building a real transit system requires substantial public and private investments. Because systems cross many local government borders, they also require the political and public policy cooperation of multiple elected officials and bodies. The Detroit Regional Chamber, the Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce, the Michigan Municipal League, and officials in Livingston County and Ann Arbor, all are working on transit.

A public policy first step to help support future rapid transit systems in Detroit, Grand Rapids and many other communities is state House Bill 6114, sponsored by Rep. Marie Donigan, D-Royal Oak.

The legislation would create geographic "transit revitalization investment zones" around transit stations. As new development occurs in the zones, the resulting growth in tax revenues could be used to fund the operation, maintenance or infrastructure of the system, and used to support new recreational, residential and commercial facilities that people today are seeking. We urge the Legislature to pass HB 6114 before the end of the year.

Other bills sponsored by Republicans and Democrats - Sen. Jason Allen, R- Traverse City, and Rep. Bert Johnson, D-Detroit - would help advance a privately funded 3.4-mile light rail system planned along Woodward Avenue between Hart Plaza and Detroit's Midtown area.

Here are some other rapid transit expansion activities around Michigan:

- The cities of Howell and Washtenaw County are working on a commuter rail line to connect their communities.
- Detroit business leaders are working with the general public, various organizations, and political leaders of Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties to develop an official tri-county transit plan with rapid transit lines and bus improvements.
- Grand Rapids and west Michigan leaders are planning a rapid transit expansion that will start with a \$40.1-million, nine-mile bus-rapid transit line already approved by the Federal Transit Administration.
- The state Department of Transportation and Southeast Michigan Council of Governments are working toward a 48-mile, high-speed commuter rail line between Ann Arbor and Detroit.

As home to a world-class bus system, Lansing has a strong start with public transit that would be strengthened by HB 6114. The legislation and transit will get Michigan moving with new jobs, development and prosperity in our urban centers.