

Mass transit tax plan hits dead end



By [Ken Kish](#), *The Macomb Daily*

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Supporters of a four-county mass transit plan for southeastern Michigan are circling their wagons and preparing for a fight.

But despite the oft-repeated call for better public transportation, these warriors should pack up their wagons and head home -- traversing our pothole filled roadways along the way.

Voter approval of a long-term tax hike -- if it reaches the ballot in November -- isn't in the cards.

A similar proposal in 2016, favored by voters in Wayne and Washtenaw counties, was trumped by the electorate in Oakland and Macomb counties. That plan would have generated \$4.6 billion through a 1.2-mill property tax hike costing the owner of a \$200,000 home \$120 the first year with likely increases based on assessment increases.

And since that narrow defeat, things have only gotten worse for the legislative-approved Southeast Michigan Regional Transit Authority.

Less than a year later, RTA's CEO was booted from his \$200,000 a year job.

The firing followed reports in the Detroit News that Michael Ford's travel expenses were being questioned. In less than three years, Ford charged the authority about \$37,000 for airfare, hotels, out-of-town meals, parking and mileage.

Ford eventually repaid \$18,863 for a portion of mileage, cellphones, health care and insurance payments he had received, the News reported.

That didn't sit well with Macomb County Executive Mark Hackel, who had remained pretty much neutral on the 2016 vote.

Here's what Hackel told the News at the time: "Here you're supposed to be managing a regional transit system, and you can't even get the financial affairs in order with the contract you have.

“Had it not been called into question, would this ever have been reimbursed? This has created a tremendous loss of the trust with the public and the RTA.”

And now Hackel, along with a majority of the Macomb County Board of Commissioners, want no part in a mass transit tax hike -- at least not until local roads are repaired.

Noting that Macomb residents already support bus services through taxes, Hackel told The Macomb Daily recently: “People trust SMART (Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transit) but some are trying to force us to solve the (transportation) problems of Detroit and Wayne County. That’s not what people are interested in right now. We have to fix the roads.”

That hasn’t stopped others from lobbying Hackel, and his counterpart in Oakland County, L. Brooks Patterson, to agree to place a tax hike for mass transit on the November ballot. A proposal by Wayne County Executive Warren Evans increases the tax hike to 1.5 mills, or \$150 the first year on a \$200,000 home.

In a letter published in the April 15 Detroit Free Press, 23 business leaders encourage support for a “workable regional transit system.”

The letter concludes: “As leaders of corporations and foundations in Southeast Michigan, we are proud of the long list of things moving in the right direction in our region. Public transit is not on that list and that needs to be changed now.”

It’s a good bet that most, if not all, of the 23 who signed the letter are millionaires who will never pay to ride a bus.

But most of us have spending priorities, and as Hackel noted, let’s fix our roads before expanding bus services.

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