

Patterson torpedoes metro Detroit transit plan, sparks war of words

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Macomb County Executive Mark Hackel, Oakland County's L. Brooks Patterson, Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan, and Wayne County's Warren Evans at an event in January.

DETROIT ECONOMIC CLUB / VIA TWITTER

With a few words during his annual State of the County address Wednesday night, Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson appeared to doom an effort to revive a regional transit plan for metro Detroit.

Wayne, Oakland, Macomb, and Washtenaw County leaders had been meeting to try and work out a new transit plan since late last year. The hope was to put together a ballot proposal and millage, under the umbrella of the four-county Southeast Michigan Regional Transit Authority, to go on the November 2018 ballot. Voters narrowly rejected another proposed RTA plan in 2016.

But on Wednesday, Patterson appeared to quash those hopes once and for all.

“I want you to know that as long as I’m county executive, I will respect the wishes of the voters of the select nine Oakland County opt-out communities,” said Patterson, referring to cities that opt out of current regional bus services. “I will not betray them and slip some, or all of them, against their will, into a tax machine from which they can expect little or no return on their investment.”

Patterson chastised “some political leaders south of 8 Mile” who have pushed him to get on board with transit. He argued that would force those communities to be taxed for services they’ve rejected, and doubled down on arguments that Oakland County already puts more money into transit than it gets back in services.

"They argue, "That would be a mark of leadership — to bring in those nine communities whether they like it or not. They call it leadership. I call it betrayal," Patterson said.

Two of those "south of 8 Mile" political leaders shot back at Patterson in unusually harsh terms on Thursday.

Wayne County Executive Warren Evans said Patterson is "wrong on this."

"Regional systems work because everyone is in it as a region as a whole. No matter the footprint, you can't cut out holes in the middle and work around them," Evans said in a statement.

Evans said he believes "there's enough support for transit in this region that it's going to come in some form." He expressed frustration with Patterson and his Macomb County counterpart, Mark Hackel, for not making their position clear sooner.

"We'll shift gears as needed. We need to build something," Evans said. "Ideally it's with the entire region on board, but we can't wait forever for everyone to be on aboard, the stakes are too high."

Evans' statement hints at the possibility, floated in recent weeks, that Wayne and Washtenaw counties might try to go forward with some kind of transit plan on their own. Those two counties voted for the 2016 proposal, while Oakland voters rejected it narrowly and Macomb voters overwhelmingly.

"There's some discussion of if Oakland and Macomb don't want to get on board with a true regional transit system, Wayne and Washtenaw move forward with a two-county transit system," said Megan Owens, leader of the pro-transit group Transportation Riders United.

“The Wayne and Washtenaw leaders at least feel it’s important to truly have a region-wide system, not this patchwork that he’s [Patterson] demanding.”

Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan also took aim at Patterson in a written statement that used equally pointed language.

Patterson publicly rejected the idea of an RTA transit plan that covers all of Oakland County,” Duggan said. “What is so hard to understand is that it was Patterson himself who lobbied for and helped pass Public Act 387 in 2012, the law that requires the RTA to have countywide transit plans.”

Duggan went on to point out that legislation requires that at least 85% of funds the RTA collects from a county be spent there. He also expressed frustration that “the staffs of the four counties and the city spent hundreds of hours working collaboratively” on a transit plan. “That’s why it was so surprising to hear him last night declare he would 'never betray' his Oakland County communities by pursuing such a plan,” Duggan said.

“While I would have preferred the courtesy of Patterson just telling us honestly he couldn’t support regional transit, at least now we no longer have any illusions about his position on the issue. Someday, Southeastern Michigan will join the rest of America in recognizing the critical importance of regional transit. But it will take regional leaders to build a regional transportation system.”