

## **Michigan Suburbs Alliance testimony on RTA legislation (SB 909)**

Richard Murphy, Transportation Director

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Senator Casperson and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak in support of the Regional Transit Authority legislation, SB 909. The Michigan Suburbs Alliance believes the creation of a regional transit authority is vitally important to the health of our citizens, communities, region and state.

To attract and retain residents, to create a region where people want to live, we need an effective transit system. This is especially true of the young professionals who choose to move out of Michigan, rather than in: in a survey of six hundred 20- to 35-year-olds last year, we found that more of them cited our poor transit systems as a barrier to staying in southeast Michigan than cited our poor job market. If we hope to hold on to the educated residents that attract employers, and who will start businesses and families in our communities, we need to provide them the transportation choices they are looking for

For our cities and suburbs, a good transit system is not only critical for attracting residents, but also for attracting development. Cities across the Midwest, from Minneapolis to Cleveland, have found that transit systems drive private investment—development firms based in Michigan hunger for the opportunity to build here rather than in other states.

Our local officials are actively working on the pieces of transit-oriented development that they can control—things like zoning changes and tax incentives. Birmingham, Ferndale, Royal Oak, Huntington Woods and Berkley have spent the last year working on a shared transit-oriented development strategy along Woodward; Dearborn, Ypsilanti and Wayne have planned for development along the proposed east-west commuter line; and a dozen others have done at least some TOD planning: the communities and the developers are ready--the missing ingredient is the regional transit system itself.

The proposed RTA can help us bring these residents, businesses and investments home to our region by giving metro Detroit a solid framework to coordinate local

transit service and oversee investment in regional rapid transit connections. SB 909 gives our region an RTA that can coordinate more efficient and effective local transit service, a vision for a rapid transit network, and the ability to ask voters to fund these investments. Most importantly, it lays out a governance structure that provides the entire region with representation and avoids gridlock, while protecting local interests.

There are a few amendments that we seek to ensure the RTA functions effectively, and to make sure that decisions on transit service are being made based on technical merit, fiscal constraints and public input, rather than legislative fiat.

For example, the bill's requirement that operation of any rail-based system needs a unanimous vote should be removed: if the authority ever seeks to operate commuter service between Detroit and Ann Arbor, Port Huron or Toledo, this requirement could block the cost-effective use of existing rails.

Similarly, the mandate that 85% of funding generated in a sub-region be spent in that sub-region means that the authority is required to make decisions based on an arbitrary number, rather than on our residents' transportation needs. A resident of Birmingham who wants to go to Detroit Metro Airport doesn't care how much money the RTA spends in Oakland County versus Wayne County—she only cares about whether the transit system can get her to the airport. When this mandate has been placed on other transit systems, it has produced inefficiencies. For example, a citizens' oversight group for Seattle's Sound Transit found that the agency was building park-and-ride lots that nobody used, just to satisfy the mandate's math.

The most pressing need for the metro Detroit region, though, is to get a regional transit authority created and operating, as the details can only be addressed by the RTA itself, and not in the legislation that creates it. The bottom line is, metro Detroit needs an RTA, now.

We have waited decades just to turn the key on this; we've got to take this step that so we can get rolling down the road. We urge your support of SB 909 and look forward to working with the RTA to create a stronger and more prosperous region.