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Editorial

Coordinated effort would improve transit's chances

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Metro Detroit needs a strong regional mass transit authority. State lawmakers should expedite getting it done for the sake of economic growth.

Several separate transit initiatives are already underway. They don't necessarily conflict with each other. But a regional authority over five counties, perhaps seven, promises more efficiency and coordination.

Each of the current efforts addresses a piece of a larger puzzle.

One proposes a commuter line between Detroit and Ann Arbor. Another announced plans for a light rail line on Woodward Avenue in Detroit from downtown to Eight Mile Road.

A second Woodward idea proposes transit, perhaps privately funded, from downtown to Grand Boulevard. Another rail commuter service, dubbed Wally, is planned for the 27 miles between Howell and Ann Arbor.

Each system has its backers and detractors. And there's some communication between the groups. But the disparate plans cry for a strong authority, with a means to raise revenue and build lines.

Metro Detroit has recently had two false transit starts. In 2002, state lawmakers created the Detroit Area Rapid Transit Authority (DARTA). But in the last hours of his administration, Gov. John Engler vetoed the bill. He was irked that an unrelated bill on education failed to make it through the Legislature.

After that, Detroit joined with Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties to form their own version of DARTA. But a lawsuit challenged the deal, and a court shot down the plan.

Both businesses and neighborhood groups favor mass transit for the same reason -- to connect people with jobs. Lacking reliable and fast public transportation hampers economic development. Yet Metro Detroit cannot find its mass transit gear.

The Regional Transit Coordinating Council recently published a vision document that serves as an excellent road map to the future. The council, under Chief Executive John Hertel, identified needed elements such as effective governance and adequate funding.

The Detroit Transit Options for Growth Study is a project under the Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT). It proposes a \$371 million light rail link on Woodward Avenue between downtown and Eight Mile Road. The plan aligns with other studies showing Woodward as the best place to start a mass transit system for the region.

The Detroit transportation agency should get kudos for initiative after failed attempts for a regional authority. Its rail plan could serve that part of the Woodward corridor well. But by stopping at the city limits, the end of DDOT's authority, it falls short of the needed comprehensive system.

A new DARTA should also integrate Metro Detroit's two bus systems in its plans -- DDOT and the awkwardly named Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation (SMART).

Over the years, transit research and analysis has come from the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments, the Detroit Regional Chamber, the Michigan Department of Transportation and others.

In short, there are plenty of ideas out there. But only a strong transit authority can make them happen. Take the good work and good intentions of all the groups and combine them into a comprehensive and cohesive whole.

The roadblocks will be the similar to those of the past: bickering between city and suburbs. The Legislature should, as it did in 2002, override the squabbling and create an effective transit authority.

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