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The Death of Public Transit in metro Detroit

"It's taken us 300 years to get where we are today"

Updated November 22, 2003. Links to more transit history resources included at bottom of this page.

1863- Horse-drawn trollies begin service on Jefferson Avenue.

1880's-Electric streetcar service begins in Windsor.

1892- Electrification spreads to Detroit, replacing horse-drawn railcars. Interurban trolley service from Detroit begins to grow, helping to create and serve several suburban areas in coming years.

1901- A Cleveland syndicate consolidates several independent interurban operations under one entity-Detroit United Railway (DUR). See MAP of the DUR system at its zenith.

1919-1920- The Detroit Rapid Transit Commission prepares the first regional transportation plan, recommending a multi-modal system. Mayor James Couzens vetoes a bond issue to create a subway system.

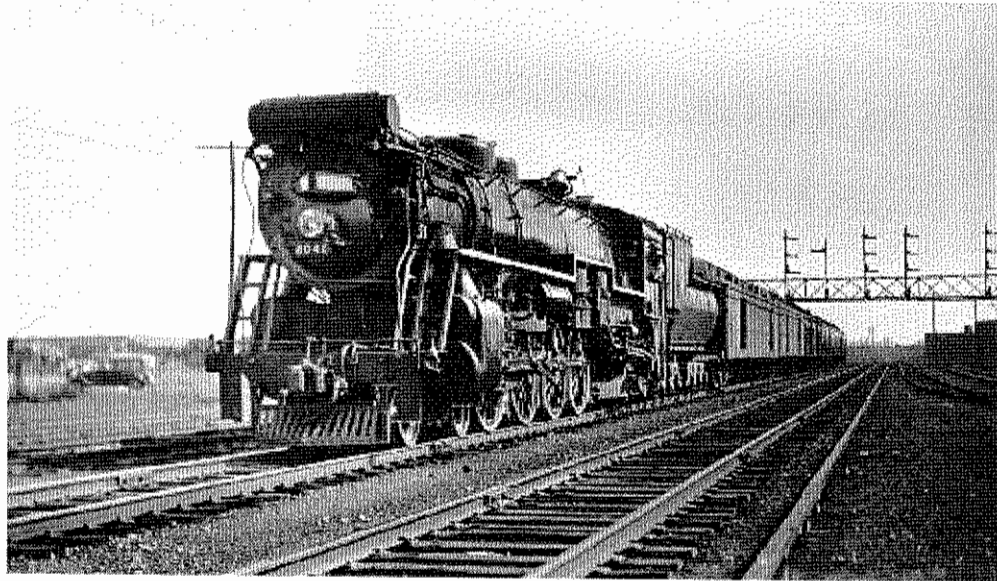
1922-The City takes over streetcar operations. Detroit now has the largest municipally owned transit system in the country: the Department of Street Railways (DSR).



Campus Martius. Unknown collection. Photo courtesy of Dave's Railpix

1925-The first buses start operating in the city. Trolleys will continue to run for another 31 years.

1929-Grand Trunk Western Railroad announces a system of rapid transit between Detroit and Pontiac utilizing rail with overhead toll expressway. The plan called for 25 electrified commuter trains a day in each direction and an auto speedway over the rails to be supported by concrete columns. The stock market crash ended these plans.



GTW Commuter Photo courtesy of Rick's Train Pictures

1931- A more conventional commuter rail service begins on the Grand Trunk Western between Detroit and Pontiac. Trip times are as short as 45 minutes each way. The trains operate behind steam locomotives as late as the early '60's, making the GTW the last railroad in the U.S. to stop running regularly-scheduled steam-powered commuter trains.

1933- Detroit voters approve a subway plan. The state advisory board refuses to recommend construction to the federal government.

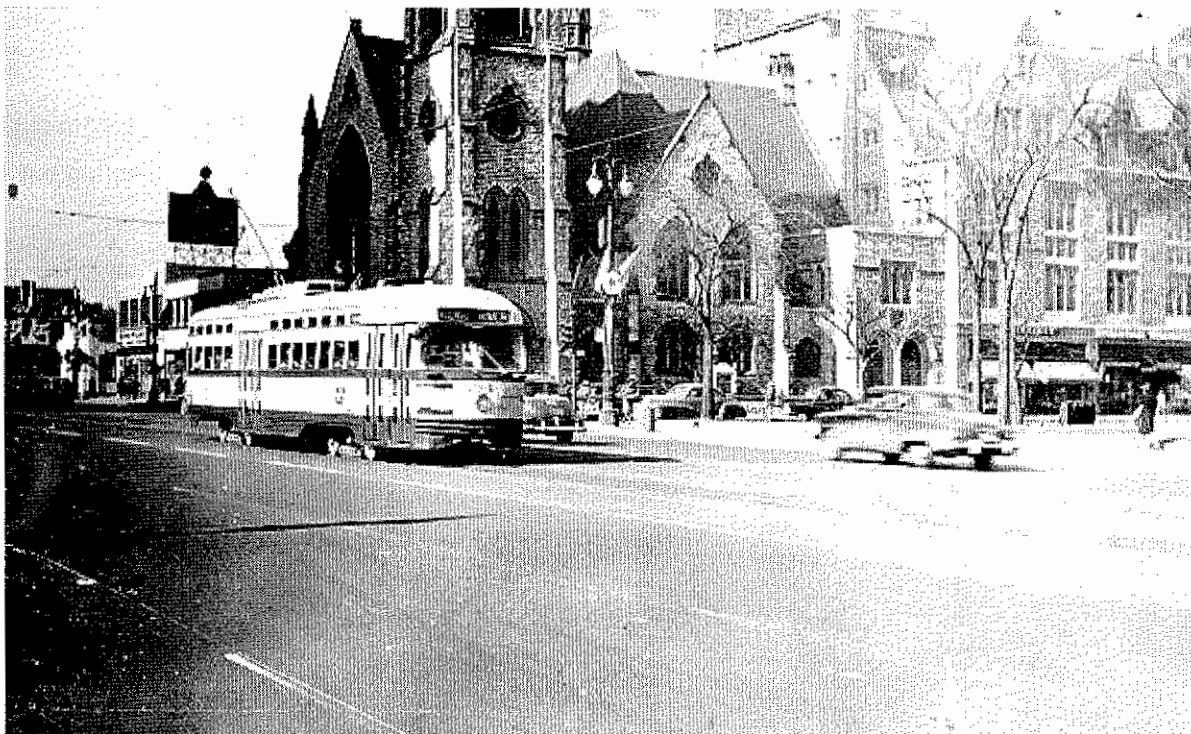
1935- The DSR releases a promotional movie about its streetcar and bus operation, claiming it is operating at a profit. (available today on VHS).

1945- The peak year of Detroit transit patronage--492 million rides. Metro Detroiters have their choice of transit that year, with scheduled bus, streetcar and commuter rail service.

1951- A transit strike lasting nearly two months negatively impacts future ridership.

1953-The Detroit Metropolitan Area Transportation Study is completed, calling for a balanced system of highways and mass transit.

1956- Metro Detroit streetcar service ceases after 93 years of streetcar and interurban history. The last streetcar ran on the Woodward line downtown.



Woodward Avenue (Bill Volkmer Collection). Photo courtesy of Dave's Railpix

1958-The Detroit Rapid Transit Commission publishes a new plan which calls for a regional monorail system.

1967- The Southeast Michigan Transportation Authority (SEMTA) is established to take over service responsibilities of financially-strapped suburban bus providers. SEMTA governance includes the tri-counties and City of Detroit.

1969-The Detroit Regional Transportation and Land Use Study (TALUS) recommends rail rapid transit in eight metro corridors.

1974- SEMTA takes over funding responsibility for the Detroit-Pontiac commuter rail service, sparing Grand Trunk the \$250,000 a year financial loss it had been bearing. Downtown employment had been taking a nose-dive,

reducing commuter train patronage. Grand Trunk had been held to only two fare increases since the '50's, further reducing needed revenues.

1974- The DSR is re-organized as the Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT).

1976- President Gerald Ford offers the southeast Michigan region \$600 million to build a rail transit system. Except for the People Mover, it never happens.

1979-SEMTA approves a detailed regional transit plan which includes the development of rail lines and a comprehensive bus system. With subsidies dwindling, SEMTA soon begins cutting transit service and laying off employees.

1983- SEMTA ceases Detroit-Pontiac commuter train service. The next year, Amtrak stops running their Ann Arbor-Detroit commuter train service. Metro Detroit hasn't had commuter rail service since.



Renaissance Center (Greg Bober Collection) Photo Courtesy of Michigan Railfan Network

1984-Regional leaders approve the Regional Public Transportation Concensus Plan, a refined version of their 1979 plan, with bus and rail. Nothing happens.

1985- Amtrak offers matching funds to build a passenger rail station at Joe Louis Arena and restart commuter service between Ann Arbor and Detroit. SEMTA can't fund its share and the idea is dropped.

1987- The People Mover begins operation. The final cost was \$67 million per mile--three times the cost of a typical new trolley system and 30 times the cost to restart commuter rail service.

1988-Plans released by SEMCOG and the Metropolitan Transit Development Committee each call for substantial transit improvements.

1989- SEMTA is reorganized without the City of Detroit and renamed Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation (SMART).

1991- SMART warns that a shutdown will be necessary without more suburban funding and a merger with DDOT.

1994- SMART and DDOT try merging 5 routes. The program was cancelled the following year when talks fell through.

1995- Tri-county voters approve a three-year transit tax to bolster SMART. Service and equipment quality improves. SMART will successfully renew this tax again in 1998 and 2002 elections.

1996- SMART and DDOT establish a common regional bus pass and announce plans to consolidate services. The consolidation dies during negotiations.

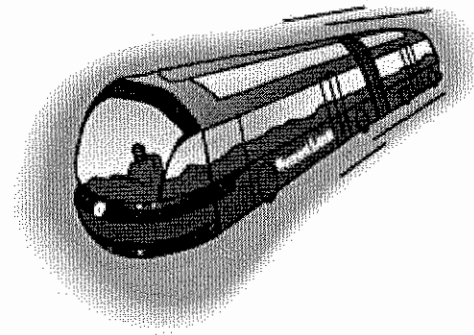
1997- MDOT publishes its summary report of a study to restart commuter rail service connecting Detroit with several suburban areas. At \$2 million per mile capital cost, it is discounted by regional leaders as being too expensive.

1998- DDOT ends suburban service, and SMART picks up the stranded ridership.

1999- General Motors removes the commuter rail spur west of Rivard Street to the Renaissance Center to make room for a parking deck. MDOT announces a plan to extend I-375 further toward the river, eliminating future downtown rail access permanently.

2000- A study is conducted to determine the advantages of merging DDOT and SMART, concluding status quo is best.

2001- The Detroit Regional Chamber of Commerce spearheads legislation to create a Detroit Area Regional Transportation Authority. Metropolitan Affairs Coalition releases its final report for a regional Bus Rapid Transit system, named "SpeedLink."



Speed Link

... A Train on Tires

2002- Legislation to create the Detroit Area Regional Transportation Authority (DARTA) is vetoed by the governor.

2003- DARTA is created through an inter-governmental agreement that includes the City of Detroit, SMART, Macomb, Monroe, Oakland and Wayne Counties. Six months later, the court declares the procedure utilized to transfer powers in creating the agreement is illegal.

SOURCES:

- **Detroit Free Press and Detroit News articles, personal research**
- **"Getting About", promotional movie by DSR, 1935**
- **Grand Trunk Western, by Patrick Dorin, Superior Publishing Co., 1977**
- **"A chronology of mass transit in metro Detroit", Detroit Free Press, April 27, 1998**

- Farmington Junction- A Trolley History, by Brian M. Golden, 1999

- "Improving Transit in Southeast Michigan", Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG), July, 2001

HISTORY LINKS:

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