
Survey: Metro Detroiters Want Better Transit and Are Willing to Pay for It

Report and Recommendations
from Transportation Riders United
November 2013



TRU surveyed 2,500 southeast Michigan stakeholders during the summer of 2013. While some knew little about public transit, many others have great ideas and relevant, real-life experiences to share. TRU recommends that we listen to and learn from one another through public engagement and educational activities.

Moreover, fully 71% of survey respondents are willing to pay more in taxes for more and better transit. TRU urges the Regional Transit Authority to give voters the choice to fund regional transit improvements as soon as practical.

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Special thanks to TRU's Assistant Director, Ruth Johnson, for overseeing this project and to our summer interns, volunteers and community partners who assisted in gathering and processing surveys for this report.

Transportation Riders United is greater Detroit's public transit advocate – a nonprofit organization dedicated since 1999 to improving and promoting public transit throughout the greater Detroit area in order to restore urban vitality, ensure transportation equity, and improve quality of life. Smart transportation investments are essential because transportation shapes our future.



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Introduction

At long last, southeast Michigan has a Regional Transit Authority. The RTA already has some broad goals and plans. These plans cannot come to fruition, however, unless area residents approve transit funding through a vote. Now is the perfect time to find out what voters already know about transit, what they do not yet know, what transit-related issues are most important to them, and – crucially – whether they would be willing to fund better public transit.

With that in mind, Transportation Riders United reached out to people throughout southeast Michigan during April through September of 2013. Our goals were threefold: 1) to hear from community members about the changes they wanted to see in public transit in metro Detroit; 2) to find out if they would be willing to fund those changes through higher taxes; and 3) to inform them about the benefits of public transportation and the underfunding of transit in metro Detroit.

TRU attended community events throughout the four county area and asked stakeholders: What do you want from your regional transit system? And would you be willing to pay \$20-40 more in taxes to improve it? Regional residents expressed many opinions, largely recognizing the importance of transit improvement. Despite the lack of clear details, a large percentage – 71% -- were willing to pay more for those improvements.

Although our survey methods were not scientific and the results only reflect those who completed the surveys, these results demonstrate substantial interest in transit improvement, a plethora of ideas for improvement, and a willingness to invest in making quality transit a reality for southeast Michigan.

Methodology

Between April and September of 2013, Transportation Riders United staff, contractors, interns, and volunteers reached out to residents and other stakeholders throughout the four-county southeast Michigan community. TRU representatives attended fairs, festivals, farmers markets, community meetings, and other public gatherings. In all, we engaged stakeholders at 50 events. We also went to transit centers and bus stops to gather the opinions of current riders. We visited locations in Oakland County, Macomb County, Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti, the Downriver area, and in the city of Detroit – some small and local events and others that drew from the entire region and beyond. We chose events that would draw crowds and that provided opportunities to engage a broad range of people of different ages, socio-economic levels, and from various racial and ethnic backgrounds.

In our community engagement activities, our main focus was completion of a one-page survey (Appendix A) along with distribution of an informational

In our interactive community engagement, we asked “What changes would you like to see in public transit?”

sheet (Appendix B) and other materials. We approached a wide variety of people at community events, talking as well with others who approached us. We asked “What changes would you like to see in public transit?” We asked each person to complete the survey. Depending on the person’s questions and interests, we also provided additional information about our organization and disseminated other materials developed by TRU, partners and transit providers.

We encouraged every respondent to provide their full name and city in which they lived, and gathered email addresses and telephone numbers of those who

indicated they wanted email updates from TRU or expressed interest in volunteering.

TRU representatives were open about the fact that TRU supports improved public transit and transit investments. However we reached out to and engaged both those who were supportive of transit as well as those who were uninterested or negative towards our mission by answering questions, providing information, and discussing current transit issues.

As designed and administered, the survey was not a scientifically valid sampling or representative of the southeast Michigan region. The results reflect the opinions of those persons who were willing to complete a survey. Many people who are not interested in or do not support public transit chose not to complete the survey so their viewpoints are not included. These included people who always drove and did not know anyone who used public transit or simply did not feel they knew enough about transit, as well as people who were simply in a hurry or needed to stay with a group.

To supplement the in-person surveys, we also mailed surveys to TRU members and received about 25 returned by mail. We also provided an online version of the survey, which was completed by 87 individuals. The largest majority of the surveys, approximately 2,350 were completed in person at community events.

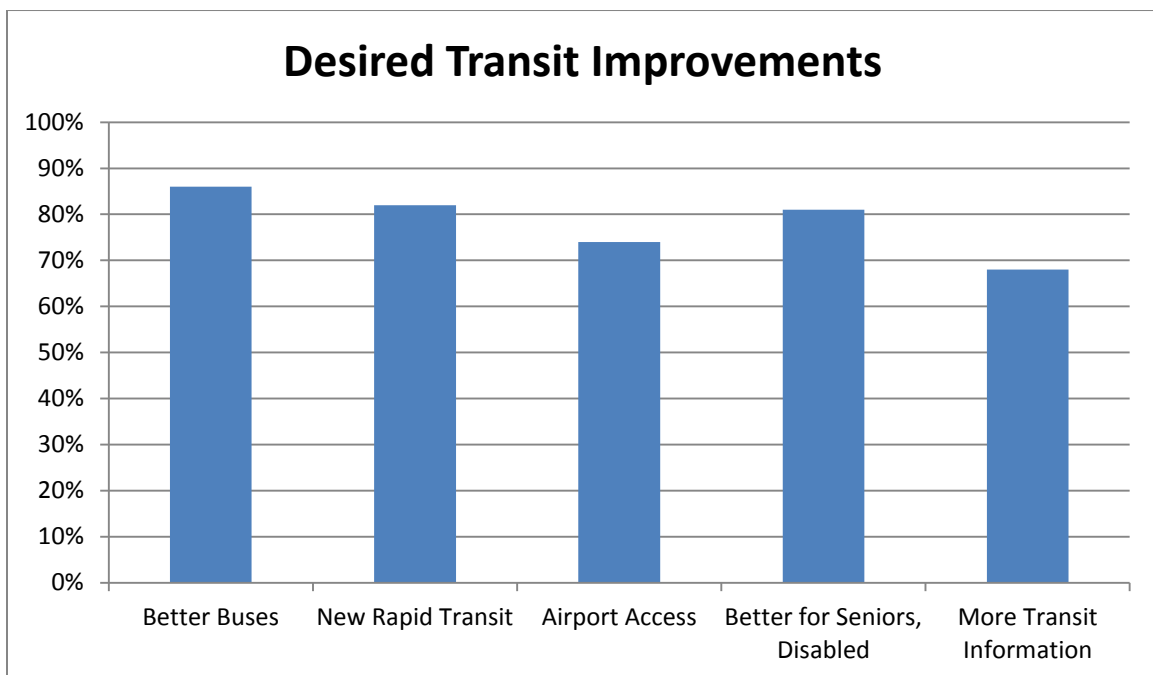
Geographic Breakdown of Respondents

As noted, TRU representatives attended events and reached out to residents and other community stakeholders throughout Macomb, Oakland, Washtenaw, and Wayne Counties. Of those who completed the survey, approximately 40% were from the City of Detroit, 22% were from Wayne County outside of Detroit, another 22% were from Oakland County, 10% were from Washtenaw County, and 5% were from Macomb County. Despite our efforts to engage the diversity of the region, the viewpoints of Macomb County residents are unfortunately underrepresented in our findings.

Findings

TRU representatives received input from nearly 2,500 regional residents. The first section of the survey sought what they were looking for in a regional transit system and gave them several options to choose from. Respondents could select multiple options. (See survey in Appendix A)

- **86%** would like to see more frequent, reliable, and safer **bus service**.
- **82%** were interested in **new rapid transit**.
- **74%** wanted affordable, convenient transit to **Metro Airport**.
- **81%** demanded better transit for **seniors, people with disabilities, and others** without options.
- **68%** wanted readily available **information** about transit services.



Top Priority: “More Frequent, Safer, and Reliable Bus Service”

Fully 86% of those who took our survey wanted better bus service – by itself or in addition to other improvements. Of the 14% who didn't, most wanted a focus on new rapid transit instead, and others were only concerned with transit to the airport.

The vast majority of respondents wanted both more frequent, safer, and reliable bus service *and* new rapid

While there is definitely strong support for new rapid transit, the top priority for area residents is a significant improvement in the existing bus system.

transit such as express buses, light rail and commuter trains. However, about 13% wanted better buses without any new rapid transit. Some wrote comments to the effect that the existing system needed so much improvement that we could not possibly add something new until current transit was improved. A higher proportion of these responses came from Detroiters than from those outside Detroit.

Rick from Taylor specifically noted the need for:

“More frequent on major routes like Telegraph and Sunday service on Telegraph. It's a joke that on a major route like Telegraph you can't even get to work on a Sunday.”

Safety and security were specifically written in and emphasized by thirty-four respondents.

“Safer buses. I recently moved and my first consideration was transportation.” - Lester S.

“Clean safe buses.” - Susan from Ann Arbor

Strong Support for “New Rapid Transit such as Express Buses, Light Rail and Commuter Trains”

A close second in priority to improved bus service, 82% of survey respondents were interested in new rapid transit.

As previously noted, the vast majority of respondents wanted both more frequent, safer, and reliable bus service and new rapid transit such as express buses, light rail and commuter trains. However about 10% wanted rapid transit but saw no need for any bus improvements. A higher proportion of these responses came from all areas outside the city of Detroit.

Written comments included:

“A local commuter train running from Ann Arbor to Pontiac. With a connector at Det New-Center to DT Det. The track and stations exist! Adding N Hamtramck, Ferndale, SW Det (Mex-T) in the future for more ridership.” – Eugene, Dearborn

“I want light rail that serves more than just the Quicken Employees.” – Jeremy, Detroit

“Light rail transit like normal cities Detroit’s size and larger.” – Floyd

Strong Support for “Better Transit for Seniors, People with Disabilities, and Others without Options”

Nearly tied for second priority, 81% of respondents felt that transit was especially important for particular groups who often have less ability to get around, including seniors, people with disabilities, and others without options. Many were concerned with transit being affordable for riders in general or for a subset of riders such as retirees. Others wanted to make sure it was accessible for the elderly, people with disabilities, and young students.

Additional Interest in “Affordable, Convenient Transit from and to Metro Airport” and “Readily Available Transit Information”

Transit to Metro Airport was supported by 74% of respondents. While not the most popular response, many of those who wanted to go to the airport on transit felt very strongly about it, writing in comments, underlining, and making other creative remarks for emphasis. Jeremy from Detroit felt quite strongly in stating (his emphasis):

“I want AIRPORT SERVICE THAT IS FAST AND RELIABLE SO WE ARE NOT THE LAUGHINGSTOCK OF AMERICAN CITIES ANYMORE.”

Although Ann Arbor residents already have transit to the airport through AirRide service provided by AAATA and Michigan Flyer, there was not a significant difference in responses between Washtenaw County and other respondents on this question; in fact, the percentage of Washtenaw County residents requesting airport service was slightly higher than the average. This could indicate that more Washtenaw County residents need to be educated about AirRide, that it is not serving the needs of the county as a whole, or just that Washtenaw County residents think the entire region deserves airport service.

While not the most popular response, many of those who wanted to go to the airport on transit felt very strongly about it.

While transit information was the least frequently checked, two-thirds of respondents did support this improvement as well. In the written comments, some respondents requested a smartphone application so they could track an upcoming bus, or at the very least better information available online.

"More regional travel (e.g. Detroit to Ann Arbor)." - Javon from Detroit

"Good connections between Detroit, Lansing, Ann Arbor and key points in the suburban counties around all those cities." - Mike from Huntington Woods

Many took the time to specify that they would like these regional connections to happen through light rail, even though this was already an option on the survey, seeming to indicate they felt very strongly about it. Others specified that they *did not* want light rail but preferred that the RTA concentrate on improving the existing bus system before adding anything new.

"Forget the light rail from downtown Detroit to nowhere and provide more buses." - Milton from Rochester Hills

Other Bus Improvements Needed

Beyond the "More frequent, safer, and reliable bus service," check box, additional bus improvements were added in the Other section. Fifty five people wrote additional comments that they want:

"Improved transit facilities"

"Cleaner, newer buses"

"Better bus stops and shelters"

"Buses that don't break down"

"Better lighting near bus stops"

Forty-three respondents, many Detroit residents, asked that transit come on time. Mary Jo, who owns a small business on a bus route in Detroit, said:

"We see people waiting for the late buses all day long!"

Lack of accountability was noted several times:

"Doesn't make sense that we don't have buses that don't run on time and that there's no accountability for it." - Aurora from Detroit

Forty-six people commented that they wanted more frequent buses or expanded hours, and especially 24-hour service for popular routes:

“Service has to be 24/7..especially if we want to present ourselves as a global entity.” - Ilene from Eastpointe

“Weekend buses run later and everything runs until midnight.” - Dave from Ann Arbor

Emphasizing the importance of reliable bus service, Launzy from Detroit even noted that he had:

Several respondents had lost jobs when service was cut or that they could no longer get to their current weekend or graveyard shift job using transit.

“Lost job due to cuts in 24hr service!”

He was not the only one – several other respondents said they had lost jobs when service was cut or that they could no longer get to their current weekend or graveyard shift job using transit.

Another forty-three requested drivers with better customer-service skills. This suggestion was sometimes worded very strongly. Victor from Detroit asks for:

“Kinder employees”

James from Detroit offered:

“Pay the drivers more money!”

Some wanted transit providers merged or other ways to travel more smoothly across the region:

“One form of card that allows transit on all forms of transportation” - Walter from Detroit

“Buses need to cross 8 Mile at all hours.” - Edward from Detroit

Additional Interest in Bicycle Amenities and Bicycle-Friendly Transit

The survey did not explicitly mention bicycles, but the forty-two people who wrote comments about bicycles clearly felt they were important. Many asked for bike lanes and other bicycle facilities independent of public transit, but even more wanted transit that was more bicycle-friendly:

"More bike space on buses" - Chris from Hazel Park

"Bicycle access on public transit" - Matthew from Royal Oak

"More room for bike riders." - James from Detroit

"More bike lanes along travel routes, not just recreational trails." - Michael from Dearborn Heights

Other Comments and Requests

Several people from places such as Livonia and Lake Orion complained they did not currently have any transit at all.

Eight hopeful people commented on their wish for a subway:

"One can always dream." - Sylvie from Detroit

Several people from places such as Livonia and Lake Orion complained they did not currently have any transit at all.

Some comments simply express disappointment or frustration with the existing transit service, with comments like:

"System currently stinks"

"One that actually exists."

Several people expressed a lack of trust in the RTA or any other entity that might impose a tax but then provide inferior service, and wanted evidence of accountability.

Many cited other cities as models of better transit in whose footsteps they'd like metro Detroit to follow.

Detroit's current transit system was (not favorably) compared to that of many other regions, such as Seattle, Chicago, Copenhagen, New Jersey, New York, Boston, London, and even Maui.

Several people expressed a lack of trust in the RTA and wanted evidence of accountability.

Findings: Willingness to Pay

The survey noted that transit improvements will not come free and asked whether respondents would be “willing to pay \$20-40 a year more in taxes for more & better public transit.” **In total, 71% of respondents marked that yes, they’d be willing to pay more for better public transportation.**

Additional comments were written in to emphasize this willingness. One respondent stated:

“I am willing to pay a millage for safe, reliable regional transportation similar to what we have with the DIA.”

Greg from Farmington Hills edited the survey to say:

“Yes, I am willing to pay ~~\$20-40~~ \$500 a year more in taxes for more & better transit!”

However, many verbal comments expressed opposition to paying more for transit, some because they did not personally utilize transit, they felt they could not afford to pay, and others felt current funds could be used better.

“I prefer that funding be shifted toward public transportation rather than expanding roads.” - Mary Jo

It was interesting to note that Wayne County residents (and particularly Detroiters) were somewhat less likely to say they would be willing to pay more in taxes to fund transit than residents of Oakland, Macomb, and Washtenaw Counties. This could indicate that there is stronger support for a new tax in counties other than Wayne, that Detroiters and other Wayne county residents feel less able to pay a new tax, or something else entirely. More public engagement is necessary to understand this difference.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In talking with many thousands of people all across southeast Michigan over these six months, we have been able to take away several important lessons.

1) Many people have strong opinions and great ideas about transit in southeast Michigan.

Many people were excited to share their suggestions, thoughts, and ideas. Many people have relevant experiences elsewhere and real-life experiences locally that produce thoughtful recommendations. That input is very valuable and should be utilized in updating the region's transit plans and otherwise influencing regional transit improvement.

2) Many more people know and think very little about transit.

Especially in the outer suburbs, some people we approached stated that they did not use transit and felt that they did not know enough to even complete the survey. This demonstrates the need for a major public education campaign to increase awareness of transit issues, needs, and opportunities.

3) Many people want more and better transit and are willing to pay more to improve regional transit.

Even without providing details of what transit improvements would result from a new transit tax, a large majority of the people we spoke with were willing to pay an extra \$20-40 a year for improved transit. While in-depth polling is needed, this is a positive indicator that the region is ready to support a new dedicated funding stream for regional transit.

With these conclusions in mind, TRU offers the following recommendations as ways the Regional Transit Authority Board can be most successful in improving regional transit in southeast Michigan.

Recommendation 1: Listen to the People

TRU recommends that the Regional Transit Authority Board direct and support a substantial effort to engage people and learn the ideas, concerns, suggestions, and other feedback from interested people throughout southeast Michigan. These ideas and suggestions should be carefully reviewed and thoughtfully incorporated into the updating of the region's transit plan and expanding and improving service.

There are a lot of good ideas, relevant concerns, and helpful suggestions among the transit riders, community leaders, and other people of southeast Michigan. The regional transit plan could miss out on important improvements, efficiencies, and opportunities to provide the best service possible if only a small group of "experts" decide the regional transit plan. Additionally, people are much more likely to support a plan that they had real opportunity to provide input into creating. Thus passage of the regional transit funding ballot measure will be more successful if there are real and significant opportunities for public involvement.

While there are always some suggestions that are not feasible and some comments that are not relevant, an effective well-planned public engagement process can minimize irrelevant comments while still ensuring everyone has an opportunity to be heard. Focusing the public engagement on the existing regional transit plans and providing an opportunity to weigh improvement options against estimated costs can result in effective input that transit planners can utilize in creating the best possible new regional transit plan.

Recommendation 2: A Major Public Education Effort is Needed

TRU recommends that interested organizations and institutions work with the RTA to conduct a major public education campaign to increase public awareness and understanding of the need for, benefits of, and return on investment of public transit.

This should include organizations, institutions, businesses, and others throughout the four-county area who recognize the importance of public transit. This should be run in conjunction with the RTA's work, although the RTA does not necessarily need to lead it.

Recommendation 3: Give Voters the Choice to Fund Regional Transit

TRU recommends that the Regional Transit Authority Board put regional transit funding before the voters at the earliest feasible opportunity. While there is substantial work that needs to be done, especially around updating the regional transit plan and educating voters about its benefits, many voters are ready to support transit funding. Many more are unsure, but may be persuaded by a strong plan with broad benefits, explained clearly, and promoted by people they respect. Some will always oppose funding, but that group should not prevent the region from moving forward as quickly as reasonably possible.

The improvements people want cannot be achieved without significant additional funding, and most understand that. Giving the voters an opportunity to express their support will produce the additional funding needed to make major transit improvements.

Conclusions

In conclusion, regional transit is an issue that impacts the entire region, directly or indirectly. Beyond the essential work that the RTA board and staff are doing, there are many thousands of people with ideas, concerns, and other input regarding regional transit improvement.

The preliminary outreach to the region's stakeholders detailed in this report demonstrates substantial interest, relevant input, and significant willingness to pay for more and better transit. Through public engagement, public education, and a timely public vote, the RTA and its supporters can make major improvement in transit throughout the southeast Michigan region for decades to come.

Appendices:

Appendix A

Survey Instrument: "Tell the new Regional Transit Authority how YOU want transit to improve your life and boost our region!"

Survey Reverse: "Background and FAQ"

Appendix B

Informational Flyer: "You Have an Important Role in Improving Transit And Revitalizing Southeast Michigan"

