

## Big Plans

### A push for radical changes in public transportation

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Jeff Irwin admits that he is an enthusiast. “Actually I’m an overzealous transit advocate.” For months, Irwin, who was the 2006-2008 chair of the county Board of Commissioners, and his fellow enthusiast, Terri Blackmore, have been talking with community groups and lobbying decisionmakers from city councils to the U.S. Congress to lay out an expansive vision of a countywide transit system. Meanwhile, John Hieftje, Ann Arbor’s mayor, has been pushing the idea of a train from Ann Arbor to Howell (WALLY, the proposed Washington-Livingston Rail Line) and has worked to make radical changes in Ann Arbor’s transportation planning. They’ve made progress. The Ann Arbor Transportation Authority is now taking meaningful steps to transform itself into a countywide authority and has taken on the responsibility of managing WALLY. Irwin, who supports the WALLY idea, is suggesting that the way to pay both for the train and for the rest of a countywide transit system is a 1.0 mill levy on the taxpayers of the county and is working to help put a millage vote on the August 2009 ballot. And Ann Arbor’s city council soon will be reviewing a plan that calls for major spending (up to \$168 million by 2030) and radical changes in the city’s transportation system, not only mostly bus transit as provided by AATA, but reconfiguring roads and highways, and even installation of light rail or trolley services.

As executive director of the Washtenaw Area Transportation Study (WATS), Blackmore has been promoting the idea of a countywide transit system for years. With the WATS Policy Committee (composed of elected representatives from Washtenaw County communities), she and her staff brought out a county transportation plan in early 2008 ([miwats.org](http://miwats.org)). The plan calls for a countywide public transit system and points out the advantages: reduction in congestion, improvement in air quality, and economic vitality. Blackmore points out that at present limited areas of the county, other than Ann Arbor, have service through a patchwork of arrangements. Some of these are Purchase of Service Agreements (POSAs) through AATA, on a fee-for-service basis. These are fragile and subject to change based on local budgets. “We need to protect the service for the east side of the county, especially Ypsilanti.” Irwin agrees, and points out that the city of Ypsilanti has had a hard time coming up with money for its POSA and notes that Ypsilanti service ties together service to Superior and Pittsfield Townships; “it doesn’t make sense without Ypsilanti”. David Nacht, Hieftje’s appointee to the AATA board who is now its chair, told a skeptical Ann Arbor city council in late January that AATA is seeking to become a regional authority partly to have “a more intelligent fashion...to provide service outside the city of Ann Arbor” and described as “silly” the recent interaction between the AATA and Ypsilanti regarding that city’s difficulty in paying for services.

Irwin, who begins with the WATS vision and expands on it, sees a county-wide transit plan that means “more frequent service with longer hours (than presently provided by AATA), more available demand response in rural areas, improved community connector service, enough that

trips could be scheduled, then add commuter train service, all those good ideas”. (Demand service such as the AATA A-Ride provides subsidized taxi service for people with limited mobility.) A countywide plan is also seen as being good for business. The county’s strategic planner, Tony VanDerworp, convened leaders from many county sectors early in 2008 for an examination of a “success strategy” for the county, now referred to as the Ann Arbor Region (<http://annarborregionsuccess.org/>). He says that all seven work groups (including one on transportation) agreed that transportation was the key to any success with all the other goals of the group, which aim to promote economic development by providing a “quality of place” that will attract young innovators. These members of what has been called the “creative class” like transit-friendly environments, where they can travel to work, arts experiences, and open green space without the need of an automobile.

## **WALLY**

But all the planning and details of a public transit system have been somewhat taken over by the focus on a north-south train between Ann Arbor and Howell. “WALLY” is one of Hieftje’s signature projects. As he explains it, “I had been working with our staff (Eli Cooper) on the idea of a north-south rail line for over a year before Great Lakes Central took over the rights to the rail line North of Ann Arbor in the spring of 2006. This opened the door to making something happen... Lou Ferris of Great Lakes Central Railroad was an obvious partner. The public launch of the...rail proposal was on June 15, 2006. Invitations had gone out from my office a week before to 60 leaders from state, local and federal government, non-profits, the business community and the University...No passenger train had run the route in decades. I wanted to demonstrate it could be done.”

Irwin, who was one of the riders on that train, was an early convert. He had been part of a group trying to bring train service between Lansing and Detroit since he was assigned to represent the county at a meeting in Lansing in the spring of 2000. That project, which has been shortened to a route between Ann Arbor and Detroit, with an important stop at Detroit Metro, is now in a final planning and implementation stage (sidebar). While this “east-west” train suffered through many delays, Irwin took up the cause of the north-south train and was part of the “WALLY coalition” that brought together a proposal to form an authority which was to be considered by the Washtenaw County commissioners in September 2007. But the Livingston County commissioners were unwilling to join with Washtenaw in an authority, so the project still had no home.

Undeterred, the coalition, which includes representatives from Howell, Northfield Township and the UM in addition to Ann Arbor and the county, had two meetings with 15th District Congressman John Dingell in hopes of getting federal dollars. Following his advice that they needed a business plan and with the help of dollars donated by members of the coalition (the county alone allocated \$150,000 for 2008), a consultant, R.L. Banks, estimated that \$32 million in capital improvements were needed and that operating expenses would be \$7 million for the first year, with \$2 million coming from fares. The study drew on a number of ridership surveys to estimate 2,600 daily trips in the first year. Hieftje sees this as a bargain, pointing to the higher costs of highway construction and the need to build parking structures if those passengers brought their autos into the city instead. “Just a thousand commuters on the train would take

away the need for a structure or two and that would mean an avoided capital cost of \$40 or \$50 million. The savings just go up from there.” He noted that he has heard that 1, 200 University of Michigan employees have already indicated that they would ride, using a ticket paid for by the UM.

But in order to pay both the startup and operating costs, the coalition needs to find federal and state funds. Dingell’s second piece of advice to the group was that they must have an “authority” – a legally constituted entity – to receive funds. With the breakdown of the two-county authority, and the encouragement of both Irwin and Hieftje, AATA chair Nacht brought the concept to his board, which voted in October to become that authority.

Now the question is how WALLY can be paid for. Blackmore had hoped that a package reforming Michigan’s transportation funding (introduced by local representative Pam Byrnes) would be in force this year. It would have allowed a number of different methods for localities to raise money for transit, including a local gas tax or sales tax. The package, following the recommendations of “TF2”, a task force on transportation, passed the House in December but failed in the Senate. According to the November TF2 report, the failure also means that Michigan may have difficulty in providing the 20% state match for federal funds. For 2008, the state needed \$30 million in matches to federal funds for “intermodal passenger” (public transit) but had only \$10 million. “Several regional rapid transit projects that have or are close to receiving FTA approval will not be able to proceed because (we) cannot provide the match needed to access federal grants.” Timothy Heoffner of the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) explains that the Federal Transit Administration (FTA)’s “new start” program require a 50% match by state and local authorities instead of the 20% match for ordinary programs. Heoffner, who was the lead staff for the TF2 study, says that “no one has the money to operate (WALLY) at this point”. MDOT has been part of the WALLY coalition and owns the tracks where WALLY would run. “We would be the contracting agency ... (and) already have contractual responsibility; we have a consulting firm working to help augment staff on several rail projects.” But Heoffner indicates that like everyone else, MDOT is waiting to see what funding is available. “Our responsibility is very fluid at this point.”

There are other complications for WALLY in vying for federal funds. Blackmore and Dawn Gabay, the acting executive director for AATA, acknowledge that WALLY will not qualify for the new start program.. Gabay explained to the Planning and Development committee last November that the project could not make the 60 month deadline and “we will have to go for an earmark”. Funds directly earmarked to a project by a congressional representative are not subject to the same limitations as those through regular programs like the FTA.

With that in mind, members of the coalition, including Blackmore, Irwin, Gabay, and Hieftje, are hopeful that Dingell will be able to secure earmarked funds for WALLY. The \$32 million needed for capital costs is most often mentioned. But a spokesman, Adam Benson, said in December that no specific promises have been made by Mr. Dingell and it appears that nothing is currently in process. “Mr. Dingell looks forward to working with WALLY coalition and the AATA in its new role...Although there has not been a specific dollar amount requested, with the AATA now in a role to do that, Congressman Dingell will be eager to hear their recommendations and ideas on how to move forward with WALLY.” Benson pointed to two

possible bills where earmarks could be added, but added that a new administration is just entering and “there have not been any concrete decisions on the timing or the amount of funding that will be allotted for either vehicle”; indeed, “it is unlikely that the entire funding for the project could be secured in one of these bills”. Unsaid in this official response is that Mr. Dingell’s power base in Congress was diluted by the recent loss of his chairmanship of the Energy and Commerce Committee to Henry Waxman. As John Broder, a New York Times reporter who has followed those politics closely, observed, “(he) clearly has lost some clout with the loss of his chairmanship”.

Of course, hopes are now turning to the new administration’s economic recovery plan. Irwin says, “We want to catch the Obama wave.” But Broder cautions that “President Obama has declared that the stimulus package would contain no earmarks”, meaning that the project would have to qualify through regular channels. But the list of projects proposed for stimulus money by the AATA staff contains no mention of WALLY, but rather focuses on immediate needs of the bus system.

A different concern for WALLY is how it will comply with Americans with Disability Act (ADA) requirements. Not only is this necessary for legal operation of a transit system, but there are vigorous advocates for the disabled who are watching this question very carefully. MDOT’s Heoffner explains that the railroad cars that WALLY expects to use are decommissioned cars from Chicago’s METRA system. The bilevel cars are owned by Great Lakes Central Railroad and the expectation is that MDOT will be responsible for safety issues to enable use of the cars both for WALLY and for the east-west rail line. But as Chris White of AATA made clear at a committee meeting in November, the cars do not meet current ADA requirements of a level boarding mechanism and other access features. The FTA will have to make a decision whether just one car per train can be retrofitted (an expensive process) or that all cars must be compliant. White said that “we can’t make a plan without the ADA result”. But Carolyn Grawi from the Center for Independent Living spoke at the November meeting to remind the board that they are expected to provide fully accessible service from the first day. In a later interview, Grawi said that the cars do not have accessible restrooms and also noted that ADA requires access within a three-quarter mile radius around each stop – a bus to bring disabled riders to the station, for example.

Perhaps given all these concerns, Nacht appears to be backing off unequivocal support for WALLY. As noted both before the city council and in an interview, he does not see it as necessarily a top priority. “Our current position is we’re going to staff it up – a difference between staffing it right and communicating to the community that it should happen. Many in the community might like (to emphasize the Ann Arbor-Detroit rail line). Or suppose that a smaller amount would expand bus service. What AATA is committed to is staffing this project and (to deciding) whether this is the best use of transportation funds. I view our role as a fiduciary for the community to spend transit dollars in the most efficient manner possible.”

### **AATA goes County-wide**

In early 2008, the AATA board began having discussions about becoming a regional authority. At a May strategic planning workshop, the board supported the idea with a “straw vote” (not an

official action). As its name implies, the AATA is a city authority under Act 55 of Michigan law. It was initiated by a city referendum in 1973 that also caused the city charter to be amended to “levy a tax of two and one-half mills on all taxable real and personal property situated within the City for the purpose of...a public transportation system for the City.” (AATA is able to extend service outside the borders of the city by contract (the POSAs)). Since it is a charter provision, it is a “perpetual millage” that does not require periodic renewal by the voters, though the millage in 2008 had been reduced to 2.056 mills because of the Headlee Amendment.

Now AATA is pressing ahead with plans to become regional (county-wide). As Nacht explained to the city council, “What is our community? It is not limited to the City of Ann Arbor – we are the Ann Arbor economic region – people who live in the city and the surrounding townships.”

At the same October board meeting where AATA became the WALLY authority, attorney Jeff Ammon spelled out how a separate county-wide authority would be formed (under Act 196) that could be activated once funding is secured. Act 196 authorities may levy up to 5 mills on property within their districts and the funding must be renewed by public vote every 5 years. A major exception is that when the district includes a “fixed guideway” (as, for example, a train), the levy can be for 25 years. Though they would be extending service into another county, that can be done by contract, similar to AATA’s existing POSAs.

As Ammon explained, once a millage vote supporting the new authority is passed, the present Act 55 authority (the city) could simply transfer all assets to the Act 196 authority. Ammon pointed to Kalamazoo as an example of a similar asset transfer planned after a November 2008 vote. (William Schomisch, the director of Kalamazoo Metro Transit, confirmed that this was the intent. If the millage had passed, both rolling stock and cash assets would have been transferred to a Kalamazoo county Act 196 authority. However, it was rejected by voters) In the AATA discussion of the current Ann Arbor city millage, it was suggested that those revenues could also be transferred to the new authority, which would use them to continue the city service.

Movement toward establishment of an Act 196 authority was continuing in early January. The AATA board hired Ammon to work with them and the loose coalition supporting a county-wide authority; he and AATA staff will be meeting with city and county administrators in early February. Irwin and Blackmore continue to press their case – as Irwin says, “We’re meeting with chief elected officers, mayors, supervisors, commissioners, to discuss what’s possible, what’s contemplated, what that might mean in terms of public investment. We try to get feedback and (find out if they are) personally supportive.” They have been briefing county commissioners on the plan to float a millage for 1 mill on the August ballot. “We are suggesting that having the (county) board act would be the most reasonable way to expand the current service.” As explained by Ammon last October, the county would vote to become the sole member of the authority, which would automatically empower the new body to float the millage issue on the ballot. (The Ann Arbor city council, and other municipalities, would have no say in the matter.)

Individual commissioners were sometimes noncommittal about their possible support for a vote to form a county-wide authority. The current chair of the board, Rolland Sizemore Jr., says, “I’m not saying I won’t support it but won’t say I will. We came out of the meeting with a lot of

questions.” Wesley Prater, a former board chair, says “I’ve had very little information about it and there was little written material. Candidly, I’m not ready to make a decision on anything at this point in time with the information I’ve got.” A new commissioner, Kristin Judge, was enthusiastic about the plan, if not about a millage. “In my opinion we need a regional countywide plan I don’t know that people would be ready to put money into a millage with the way the economy is. I don’t want to say that if we can’t pass a millage right now we shouldn’t start the discussion.” Judge stressed the argument that such a plan is critical to the economic development of the county, and attracting the young technology workers who would appreciate public transit. Commissioner Jessica Ping admitted to being skeptical, but “I represent 9 different municipalities and I would want to make sure I converse with all of them and where they stand before I were to make any statement of support.”

One of the dynamics that could affect a decision by the commissioners is how the board members of a county authority would be appointed. The current AATA board expects to be moved en masse to the new board as Ann Arbor’s representatives. Irwin has been attempting to make representatives of each area feel that they are represented on the new board and also that their districts are being fairly treated in terms of tax paid and service received. His current proposal would be to add eight new members appointed by representatives of areas outside Ann Arbor, while retaining the seven members appointed by the mayor of Ann Arbor. (Not all current members of the AATA board are residents of Ann Arbor; board chair Nacht is from Scio Township, for example.) This would give Ann Arbor a substantial place at the table, reflecting its higher millage, while the city would not have a majority of the board members. He also sees service allocated on a basis of tax dollars collected: “people are more likely to support increased investment if their dollars support service in their community”. Commissioner Jessica Ping agrees: “my big argument is going to be that if this millage goes through, that Manchester doesn’t have just one bus route once a day.” When asked if this means that Manchester should contribute dollars to support WALLY, Irwin hedged somewhat, saying that the urban areas like Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti will receive the greatest benefit from that service. But Ann Arbor Barbara Bergman says “A county-wide transit authority makes sense. But I don’t like the idea of township representatives having a majority. I’m concerned about us (Ann Arbor) having a minority representation on the board.” As presented to the city council, Nacht’s picture of representation varies slightly from Irwin’s – he suggested that the city would have a majority of votes on the board as long as it contributes the most money.

### **Other challenges**

There are other ambitious plans also vying for attention – and dollars – from AATA. Members of the Planning and Development committee received a shock when Ann Arbor transportation specialist Eli Cooper presented the draft Ann Arbor Transportation Plan Update ([a2transportationplan.com](http://a2transportationplan.com)). The AATPU, which is set to be reviewed by the city planning commission in March, assigns substantial new initiatives to the AATA, proposing that they spend \$14 million by 2013 and \$54 million by 2030 on capital improvements alone, not including the “signature routes”, which might be light rail lines serving Plymouth, Jackson, State, and Washtenaw corridors. Operating costs are extra. The AATPU is partly based on the Model for Mobility introduced by Hieftje in 2006. It calls for a north-south and east-west rail line, and at least three rail stations in addition to the signature routes; it also details many

intersection changes and technological fixes to make traffic move more efficiently. For example, AATA buses would have devices that would allow them to alter traffic signal operations, so that buses would not sit at red lights.

But the AATA is already struggling with its budget and its current responsibilities. It has subsidized routes to Ypsilanti in the past and recently underwrote an express service to Chelsea, using a federal grant. Meanwhile it, like all other government agencies, is being hit by nearly half a million dollars in tax losses because of Pfizer's leaving. The agency announced some service cuts in May 2008, especially mid-day service. The 2009 budget just balances, with taxes providing about \$9.7 million of its \$24 million operating expenses. Passenger fares are about \$3.5 million, nearly a million is from POSA contracts, and the balance is made up of federal and state aid. But a committee recommended a fare increase after hearing in early December that budgets will turn negative in the near future. State aid is now at the lowest legal level and there has been a loss of investment income at the same time that a new bus route has been added to the Amtrak station, along with other new responsibilities and projects. The AATA board decided in December to accept the recommendation and voted to increase the basic fare from \$1 to \$1.50 over the next two years, after a public input period.

Board members were showing some nervousness by January about the new demands being made on the AATA. Planning and Development committee chair Ted Annis asked staff to prepare contingency plans assuming a catastrophic loss in revenues. Committee members also revolted at the request from the city to "approve" the AATPU, with Paul Ajegba saying, "Why sign on to a master plan that we don't agree with?", while Rich Robben said, "We don't have to be the first organization that approves it." Annis tabled the request. Some of the same unease was expressed with regard to the WALLY project, where board members began to ask about the actual commitment that AATA is making up front. Annis said, "We need an economic analysis to justify this thing", while planner Chris White said "this project has had a life of its own without addressing the really difficult questions". Robben was concerned that AATA was starting to take action. Gabay, who has stressed in the past that AATA will have to return any federal grants if the project does not materialize, said that AATA will not want to commit real funds until "we see what is going on". Annis worried that in this economic climate "any new tax is going to be as popular as a bank failure".

### **Service complaints**

The AATA also has to confront some complaints and anxieties about the level of its current bus service, especially within Ann Arbor. A frequent commenter on AATA, Edward Vielmetti ([vielmetti.typepad.com/vacuum](mailto:vielmetti.typepad.com/vacuum)), has been pressing for moment-to-moment information on location of buses. He says "What I'm after is understanding just how far I can reasonably go from where I am to somewhere else useful based on bus routes, my willingness or ability to walk, and the minute by minute information about how late the bus is." Vielmetti has commented extensively on the actual passenger experience of using the bus as primary transportation. Nacht, whose presentation stressed the importance of the system in serving commuters coming into the city rather than getting around it, ran into a buzz-saw of criticism at the January council meeting about the plan for increased fares, the current level of service and the implication of extension to a countywide responsibility. Stephen Rapundalo expressed

frustration with the focus on peak-hour service only. Marcia Higgins noted that she has raised questions about service for years and has not had them answered satisfactorily. Carsten Hoenke noted that it takes an hour and fifty minutes to go from west Ann Arbor to east Ypsilanti Township. Higgins stressed the difficulty in getting around Ann Arbor due to the hub-and-spoke system. She said that she had a concern that with the new proposals, “we are not going to be improving our services a great deal”.

Other current users of the system are concerned too. Grawi says “we are very concerned ...that we don’t want to have any service that people currently receive decreased. Ann Arbor has been committed to having excellent service within its borders. Will we get enough funds to maintain (that)?” Jim Mogenson, a community activist who has often attended AATA meetings, comments that while a means is needed to bring people into the urban area, transit is needed within the urban area. “If resources are reallocated to non-urbanized areas, we are in a sense subsidizing sprawl”. Mogenson supports having comprehensive service to the eastern part of the county (the Ypsilanti area) and says that “any new countywide service has to consider the impact of ...changed service on areas of lower-income or minority population.”

### **Who decides and who pays?**

A crux of the issue is the fate of the Ann Arbor perpetual millage. LuAnne Bullington, an AATA observer, is especially concerned about the potential for its loss. She says “that permanent millage is what has made Ann Arbor stable” . Irwin expects that the current city millage (about 2 mills) will remain in place “unless the voters amend the charter”. The question of who has the ultimate authority over the disposal of those funds is being studied by the current city attorney, Stephen Postema, at Hieftje’s request. Hieftje said at the January meeting that “it (a change to a regional authority) would take a change in the charter” (and, he said a vote of the citizens). But in a later email he said that “So far as I understand the charter, the AATA does not own the two mills. It was money approved for transportation and not specifically bus service. It is part of the budget approved by council.” Former city attorney Bruce Laidlaw cautions that this may be complicated by the outcome of a 1974 lawsuit in which the city was forced to give back money it had appropriated from the AATA millage. Depending on how that judgment is interpreted, it could be argued that AATA has governance over its millage as long as it fulfills its obligation to use the money raised for transit within Ann Arbor. Currently, the millage provides only about 40% of the AATA revenues.

The success of the brave vision of a countywide transit system does seem to be bound up with the success of a county-wide millage vote, though Nacht told the city council otherwise. Certainly the main proponents are treating it as such. Irwin estimates that a countywide levy of 1 mill will raise about \$15 million. “We should be able to leverage that at least on a dollar to dollar basis with state and federal funds plus fares.” But this means that not only will county voters be asked to add 1 mill to their tax bill (this is as much as the entire levy for many townships), but Ann Arbor voters will evidently be asked to add that to their present 2-plus mills paid to the AATA, so that the owner of a house worth \$200,000 (still not unusual in Ann Arbor) will be paying more than \$300 yearly to support public transit. Sidney is skeptical. “I’m not convinced in this economy if you took the existing (2-plus mills) millage to the voters whether it would get approved. More people don’t use it than do use it. I see no reason that Ann Arbor voters would

vote to tax themselves to travel to various parts of the county when most of them aren't using the existing bus system in town." Bullington agrees and is also concerned about the potential liability to the Ann Arbor service of taking on WALLY. "Does Ann Arbor want to become liable for debts incurred to bring transportation to Livingston County?" Some Ann Arbor elected officials are even more direct. At the council meeting, Rapundalo told Nacht that if what he had heard about an approach that "would raise the millage...on the backs of Ann Arbor taxpayers" was being proposed, "I would say to you that you go back to your board and make it clear that you are on the wrong track". Ann Arbor county commissioner Barbara Bergman is also dubious about Ann Arbor citizens taking on more taxes to help with services to townships, given her experience with the city's subsidy of township police services. "What's in it for us? I believe in mass transit but I'm not sure I can ask people to put out more."

Experience in passing millages in other Michigan urban areas for regional authorities has been mixed lately. Last November, Lansing-area voters approved an increased millage of 0.787 mills to support the Capital Area Transportation Authority, with 64% voting yes. But on the same day, Kalamazoo County voters defeated a millage for 0.63 mills plus incremental increases, with 58% voting no. According to Schomisch, the existing Kalamazoo city millage expired at the same time, so the system is now operating on reserve funds, still held at the city level, while officials regroup for new millage votes.

So could the millage pass even if Ann Arbor voters didn't support this extra level of taxation? Washtenaw County clerk Larry Kestenbaum has been a student of politics and voting behavior for decades. He compared a couple of county-wide millages from recent years, the "jail millage" in February, 2005, and the 800 MHz vote in May 2006. While the jail millage was defeated 62-38%, the 800 MHz was voted in by almost exactly the same percentage margin. While Kestenbaum acknowledges that "Ann Arbor is the heartland of yes votes," he judges that the city is not necessarily decisive in county-wide votes. For the jail millage, Ann Arbor supplied 39% of the yes votes, but for the police radio item, only 29% of the yes votes. The difference, he says, is that there was an organized opposition to the jail, while friends and relatives of law enforcement officers helped build a positive consensus for the radio issue countywide. "Once you get to the point where people are mad enough to start printing up bumper stickers and signs", it is difficult to win. Kestenbaum concludes that the important thing is to start slow and build a consensus. VanDerworp agrees and hopes that support for a countywide authority can be built through the informal discussions being held through the Ann Arbor Region Success group. He says for a successful program of this magnitude, "you've got to have not just government but business and nonprofit champions...this is going to take all of our leadership and our fiscal resources".

Certainly Blackmore and Irwin, who are both very persuasive, are working slowly and steadily to build this consensus with their numerous meetings with community decisionmakers. They have also obtained a grant for a survey and are "obtaining feedback" as they go. But Prater warns that voter demographics for an August vote may be unfavorable. "Public transportation has to be supported by some revenue stream and it appears that the only one right now is an additional property tax – a tough sell in my opinion." He notes that a consultant for his recent winning campaign found that 70% of likely primary (August) voters in his district were over 60 – a group likely to be sensitive to increased taxes. Sizemore, who also represents Ypsilanti Township,

notes that though many people in his district need the service, others don't use it. "We're in an economic crisis and asking people to pay for something they don't use is a hard sell."

If only half of the proposed changes – two trains, signature routes with light rail or trolley, countywide transit service, a new status for AATA – take place in the coming year, the picture of transportation in Ann Arbor will be noticeably different for decades to come, after a long period of relative sameness. If this does happen, it will be in large part due to the expansive vision of John Hieftje, who has made all this his mission. He isn't thinking just about a train between Ann Arbor and Howell, but a train to Traverse City. "If we can make commuter rail work between here and Howell the next stop could be Owosso. Then it is on to Cadillac and into Traverse City and points in between. When word of our train ride got to Traverse City people began calling us to find out when it would start." He has also been a leading proponent of nonmotorized transportation means such as walking and bicycling. "I convinced council to devote 5% of our Act 51 money (from the state gas tax) to non-motorized transit. We are the only government in Michigan doing this." In addition, the city and county transportation coalition recently announced that they are seeking a \$50 million federal grant for "community active transportation", to make it more walkable and bikeable. The range of proposed changes and new programs is dazzling. This year will determine whether elected officials and voters in Ann Arbor and the rest of the county will accept both the changes and their cost.