


## Move Regional Transit Bills Forward

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Seven years ago, in an act of petty political petulance, outgoing Gov. John Engler vetoed [Detroit](#) Area Regional Transportation Authority (DARTA) legislation that he had vowed to support. Despite that setback and many others, the region approved a regional transportation plan a year ago and is now on the verge of taking the next step by establishing an authority to oversee the plan's execution.

Long-awaited bills establishing a Regional Transit Authority for southeast Michigan were introduced in the House on Thursday. State representatives should approve the bills this month and send them to the Senate for action early next year.

The bills lay the groundwork for building a transportation system in Detroit and Wayne, Oakland and Macomb Counties that will benefit the entire region. Further delays will put southeast Michigan at a disadvantage to compete for federal transit funds in the next six-year transportation bill, shoving metro Detroit further behind urban areas like Denver and even Grand Rapids, where elected officials have already demonstrated their ability to collaborate on regional transportation plans.

Among other things, the plan put together by the Regional Transit Coordinating Council calls for a governing board appointed by the mayor of Detroit, executives of Wayne and Oakland counties, the chairperson of the Macomb County Commission, and the governor. The authority would hire a CEO to construct and operate a regional transit system. It would also have the authority to tax -- but only after a vote of the people.

While legislators move these bills forward, the leaders of Wayne, Oakland and Macomb and the city of Detroit -- the so-called Big Four -- and transportation czar John Hertel must continue to work out differences over how a regional transit system should operate. The city of Detroit, for example, continues to have concerns about protecting the 65-35 split of federal transit funds to the city and suburbs.

Those fears are not unfounded. Suburban leaders believe that the split, devised in the 1980s, now penalizes the suburbs, due to their ridership and population growth. A House bill would abolish the 65-35 split in favor of one based on standard federal and state formulas, including ridership and miles. Such a change would shift transit money from the city to the suburbs.

Despite those thorny differences, local leaders must move forward. Funding is a separate issue that shouldn't hold up efforts to create a governing structure. Ideally, in a unified regional system, leaders won't have to worry about funding splits. Nor will Detroit have to worry about paying \$80 million a year out of its general fund for city bus service. Getting past these divisions will take courage and new ways of thinking -- in other words, real leadership. But further

inaction by the Legislature, holding back a region that is home to half the state's population, would be inexcusable.