

WAYNE COUNTY

Opposition group looks to defeat SMART bus millage renewal

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A group opposed to an August millage in Wayne County that would generate funds for Metro Detroit's SMART bus system has banded together, saying the buses have too low of ridership and generate too little funding from fares to make the millage a worthy taxpayer investment.

The opposition group, called Not Smart Wayne, is making its case as 17 cities in Michigan's most populated county prepare to vote on the millage for the first time on Aug. 4. Wayne County has, until now, allowed cities to choose not to participate in the approximately 1-mill property tax for SMART bus funding. But the state Legislature passed a bill in 2024 prohibiting the county's communities from opting out, [which Gov. Gretchen Whitmer signed in January 2025](#).

"It is a fantasy that these transit rider people have in their heads, that somehow we can overlay a European transit system on a suburban community with suburban-type density," said Matthew Wilk, one of Not Smart Wayne's organizers.

He formed the opposition committee in March alongside co-organizer Patty Pozios.

More: [Wayne County moves to ban SMART opt out for cities through legislation; foes plan fight](#)

But SMART CEO Tiffany Gunter said the bus system provides a critical service and has improved in recent years based on some key measures. Its added three new

routes in Oakland County since 2022, the last renewal of the millage that also eliminated the opt-out choice for the county.

She added ridership has increased by 40% over the last few months on the Woodward and Gratiot corridors, two of SMART's busiest routes, and frequency of buses arriving has improved to 20 minutes on those avenues.

"So the system is improving. And I can say that because I'm seeing it day to day," Gunter said.

Gunter said if the millage fails in August in Wayne, SMART would have to eventually shut down in the county.

The property tax millage that subsidizes the SMART system was first passed by voters in 1995. It has come up for renewal every four years since, but this year the ballot question asks Wayne County voters to renew it for 10 years. The system operates 47 routes and has about 9 million passengers each year.

Gunter said SMART also provides door-to-door service for people who live within three-quarters of a mile of a bus route, and is piloting a "micro-transit" door-to-door service akin to a rideshare program.

But Wilk, who recently spoke at a Livonia City Council meeting, contends each SMART bus has an average of just 3.8 riders, based on a statement in 2024 of 48.7 million passenger miles traveled and a figure provided to the federal government that same year reporting 12.5 million vehicle miles. He contends low ridership means the buses don't reduce traffic congestion, provide environmental benefits or create less wear and tear on roads.

But Gunter said she thinks the average daily number of passengers on a route — about 26 — is a better measure of ridership because it's easily trackable.

"Obviously I'm biased ... but I can trace the number and understand where it came from, looking at the passenger count per vehicle, and that's a number that I can rely

on and stand behind and show my work," she said.

The leader of a key transit advocacy group argues that because the SMART bus system provides a public service, its worthiness shouldn't be evaluated based on ridership numbers. The worthiness of a fire department wouldn't be judged by how many fires its firefighters put out, or a library based on how much in fines it brings in, said Megan Owens, executive director of Detroit-based Transportation Riders United.

"They're looking at the completely wrong measures and not acknowledging that this is a public service that provides an enormous public benefit," she said.

Owens said a variety of mass transit options are especially important for people who rely on them because they can't drive, like people with disabilities and seniors.

"You don't have extraordinary ridership, but that's why you need to invest in it and provide more options for people, especially as gas prices are going so high and seniors are aging. We need more options, not fewer," she said.

In Oakland County, communities had been allowed to opt of SMART but in 2022, voters approved a 10-year, 0.95-mill countywide property tax for transit. Macomb County has never allowed communities to opt out; it has a dedicated 0.95-mill property tax for SMART, approved by voters in November 2022 for five years.

Of the 17 opt-out communities in Wayne County, Detroit is the only one that gets SMART bus service, because of buses running along major corridors in Detroit's suburbs such as Michigan and Grand River Avenues, despite not paying the mill levy. The city funds its own bus system through the Detroit Department of Transportation.

Wilk believes recent route additions and expansions in Oakland County have fallen short of expansion promises by SMART. He's been going to local council meetings to fight the millage renewal and also getting his group's message out on social media and in emails.

"I do not accept their promises that this is what they're going to do. "Their action is always, "Take the money first, then we'll talk about how we're going to use it," he said.

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