MICHIGAN ENVIRONMENTAL COUNCIL

May 9th, 2018

House Tax Policy Committee
Lansing, MI

Re: HB 5872

Committee Members:

Michigan Environmental Council, a coalition of 65+ member groups statewide, has been involved with discussions around the Regional Transit Authority (RTA) in Southeast Michigan from day one. We were active in 2016, educating individuals on the benefits the RTA would provide to the four counties it would serve. Unfortunately, the last ballot proposal lost by less than a percentage point and now the RTA board is deliberating on what a new plan may look like. We are excited about another opportunity for the RTA, but it must be truly regional. We are opposed to HB 5870 and would like to work with the sponsors of the legislation and the RTA leadership to ensure that the next RTA succeeds in a way that can please all residents involved.

In order to be effective, a regional transit system must fully connect the region it intends to serve. Out of all the regional transit authorities in the United States, only one system, the current SMART system, allows for communities to wholesale opt-out. Approximately 50 communities in the area served by SMART have opted out of participating in the system, which has led to the transportation problem we have in southeast Michigan. Creating another regional transit system with an opt-out will only lead to that same result: sub-par transit for the entire metro area.

When Amazon chose not to place their HQ2 in Detroit, they followed up with city leaders on why Detroit wasn't chosen. It all came down to talent and transit. The city of Detroit did not have the talent in the city, nor did the region have the transit system necessary to get that talent to the HQ2. Six of the top ten transit system cities ended up as finalists for HQ2, and a seventh, Seattle, already has Amazon's headquarters. HB 5870 only ensures that a full transit system will never be developed in Southeast Michigan.

Millennials think about transportation more holistically than previous generations, and nearly half would give up owning a vehicle when presented with good transit options. In fact, 66% of Millennials had "good transit system" as the number one criteria in looking for a place to live. If we are truly looking at attracting and retaining talent, we must make our cities a better place to work, live and play. Talent is no longer moving to the employer, more and more young people pick a place to live and then find employment. If Michigan is to continue its comeback, the state and its cities have to invest in a holistic transportation system.

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In order to do transit right, you also have to tailor it correctly to move people efficiently from point A to point B. While right sizing the RTA by including a population density threshold or simply drawing lines at a different point than the county is appropriate, a Swiss cheese approach will not work. We hope to continue conversations around the RTA's covered region. Whatever shape is agreed to for the RTA, it must be a full shape to serve as a foundation for the region's future economic growth. Allowing communities to poke holes in the RTA region only ensures that more and more young talent will choose a different place to live, and companies like Amazon will follow. We urge you to not keep the status quo of SMART, and instead let the RTA develop a modern Detroit and a modern southeast Michigan that will continue to grow and thrive.

Thank you,

Sean Hammond

Sean Hammond
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Michigan Environmental Council