

OUR VIEW — MAX transit deserves public support

Sentinel editorial board

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Kathryn Gray recommends this.



Holland, MI — The Macatawa Area Express, popularly known as MAX, is more than a bus system. It's really a lifeline for thousands of area residents who depend on it to get around town and participate fully in their community. It's for those neighbors in our community that we urge residents of Holland Township and the city of Holland to renew the 0.4-mill MAX tax assessment on the May 3 ballot.

MAX is a reliable, all-weather local transportation alternative for those in the community who can't afford a car or aren't able to drive. Without the bus system, many low-income, elderly and disabled residents would find it difficult, or impossible, to get to work or school, do their shopping or make it to doctor's appointments. In short, they would be cut off from many of the activities those of us with cars take for granted. We hope local residents have gotten over the old misconception that nobody rides the bus in Holland. MAX provided 340,000 rides in the year that ended Sept. 30. Visit the Padnos Transportation Center at Eighth Street and Lincoln Avenue, the MAX system's hub, at the top of the hour and watch the bustle as dozens of riders transfer from one route to another. This is a well-used community service.

The question on the May 3 ballot would renew a millage approved by Holland Township and Holland city voters in 2006. (The city of Zeeland pays for MAX service on a contract basis, not through a property tax.) That millage allowed the MAX Transit Authority to expand its network from three to seven fixed routes that cover the most populated areas of the city and township along with major shopping and employment destinations, while continuing to operate the on-call "dial a ride" system. If the MAX board levied the maximum 0.4 mill, the owner of a home with a taxable value of \$100,000 would pay \$40 a year. (Since 2006, the board has set the actual tax rate at 0.35 mill.) That would generate about \$890,000 a year, a little less than a quarter of MAX's budget. As in every transit system in America, even the highest-volume big-city systems, farebox revenues generate only a small portion of overall income for MAX — just 6 percent last year. MAX depends on the local tax assessment, along with state and federal funds. The tax money would support operations only, not capital expenses such as the 2009 bus purchases funded by the federal stimulus.

We'd like to see improvements in MAX. Running loop routes that visit every stop just once an hour means riders have to plan their trips carefully or spend a lot of time waiting; we hope MAX can at some point return to the half-hourly service it offered before expanding its route network. But any improvements will require continued public support through a millage renewal.

MAX is an important service to Holland, and it may become even more so as gasoline prices rise; bus ridership spiked in 2008 when gas prices topped \$4, and we expect it will do so again. Holland should not be a community that's completely dependent on the automobile. We can maintain a viable and valuable transportation alternative by renewing the MAX millage May 3.

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