

Dude, Where's My Ride?



For thousands of years Jews have been studying in pairs or in groups, respectfully debating each other, learning the stories and legal texts of Judaism, and investigating their past as a means for enriching their present. Tonight, we continue to engage in the millennia-old practice of exploring the written word as a means to connect with our tradition, open ourselves up to our inner selves, make sense of the world around us, and inspire us to action. Thank you for joining us on this journey.

*This evening's event is part of The Well's **CSI: Coffee. Study. Interpret.** series, in partnership with Detroit Jews for Justice, and is made possible in part by funds granted by The Covenant Foundation. The statements made and the views expressed, however, are solely the responsibility of The Well.*

A Proposal Authorizing the Regional Transit Authority of Southeast Michigan (RTA) to Levy an Assessment

The proposal would authorize the Regional Transit Authority of Southeast Michigan (RTA) to levy within Macomb, Oakland, Washtenaw, and Wayne counties a property tax assessment:

- At a rate of 1.2 mills (\$1.20 per \$1,000 of taxable value).
- For 20 years beginning in 2016 and ending in 2035.
- The tax may not be increased, renewed, or used for other purposes without direct voter approval.
- To be used upon the affirmative vote of an RTA board member from each RTA member jurisdiction for the purpose of construction and operation of a public transportation system connecting Macomb, Oakland, Washtenaw, and Wayne counties, including rapid transit bus routes across county lines, specialized service for senior citizens and people with disabilities, commuter rail, airport express service, and other public transportation purposes permitted by law, consistent with RTA bylaws and subject to the limitations of the Regional Transit Authority Act.

If this new addition assessment is approved and levied, revenue will be disbursed to the RTA. It is estimated that \$160,907,285 will be collected the first year.

Should this assessment be approved? YES [] NO []

- *Have you ever ridden the bus in Southeast Michigan? Why or why not?*
- *Have you taken public transit in another city? If so, where, and what was it like?*

Babylonian Talmud: Sanhedrin 17b

“A talmid haham (Torah scholar) is not allowed to live in a city that does not have these 10 things: a beit din (law court) that metes out punishments; a tzedakah fund that is collected by two people and distributed by three; a synagogue; a bath house; a bathroom; a doctor; a craftsman; a blood-letter; (some versions add: a butcher); and a teacher of children”.

- *If the Talmud were being written today (instead of 1500 years ago), do you think transit would be included in this list of amenities? What else would be added? Would a “talmid haham” be permitted to live in SE MI?*

Babylonian Talmud: Bava Batra 8

[A person who resides in a city] thirty days becomes liable for contributing to the *tamchui* [soup kitchen], three months for the *kuppah* [tzedakah fund], six months for the clothing fund, nine months for the burial fund, and twelve months for contributing to the repair of the city walls.

- *Why does responsibility increase as the time one dwells in a location increases?*
- *What sense do you make of the priorities in this text?*
- *What is the relationship between citizenship and participation in communal needs?*

**Justice, Wealth, Taxes:
A View from the Perspective of Rabbinic Judaism
- R. Dr. Aryeh Cohen**

(The following is a commentary on a commentary on a Talmudic discussion about how a city's wall should be paid for... don't you love Judaism?!)

"Abulafyah then challenges the notion that the reason that houses closer to the wall should pay more has to do with security needs. Abulafyah claims, logically, that either, one, the wall is being built during peaceful times and then it is not at all clear if there will ever be a band of marauders, or two, the wall is being built during a war while the city is under attack and as such the wall will never be built in time. Therefore, Abulafyah claims that the reason that those on the outer reaches of the city need to pay more is because they expand the footprint of the city and cause everybody to build more wall."

- *What do you think of this logic?*
- *How might it map onto our region and the history of "white flight"?*

Rosh Hashana 5777 - Rabbi Alana Alpert

Projects like the Regional Transit Authority are called "infrastructure" -- but that only happened in the last couple decades -- they used to be called "public works."

How does this sound: "Infrastructure is sacred creation." Eh.

Now how about this: "Public works is sacred creation." Better, right?

In Hebrew our word for "work," Avodah, is the same as our word for "service" or "worship." Work is holy.

Public work? Collective work? Even holier.

- *Can you identify spiritual challenges in this and other efforts for a just transit system?*

How metro Detroit transit went from best to worst

- Dan Austin, Detroit Free Press, 2/10/2015

At the turn of the 20th Century, southeast Michigan had the largest and one of the best mass transit systems in the country. Today, we have one of the worst.

"In 1903, southeast Michigan had the largest mass transit system in the United States," said Tobi Voigt, chief curatorial officer for the Detroit Historical Society said. "From Imlay City to Rochester, it was huge. ... There were tracks on every little side street you can imagine."

- *How might our region be different if we had a thriving public transportation? How would this affect your life?*

Bloomfield Hills says no to SMART

- Jay Grossman, 6/11/2015

Let's face it: Wealthy people aren't taking the bus. And they're probably not interested in paying for others to ride one.

That message came across in Bloomfield Hills, where the city commission voted 3-2 Tuesday against joining SMART. Opting into the SE Michigan regional transportation system would cost the city about \$750,000 a year, but a majority of commissioners felt taxpayers wouldn't be getting enough bang for their buck.

"Over 50 communities have opted out of SMART, including Novi, Northville, Livonia, Rochester and Plymouth, and Bloomfield Hills," Commissioner Sarah McClure said at the meeting. "And it's mainly been a financial reason — it hasn't been that these communities are necessarily against mass transit. In some cases, they found it made more sense to provide their own transportation."

"This is not New York or Chicago," resident Charles Dare said at the meeting. "I just don't feel our community needs bus service. I think we can take care of our own, so to speak."

- *What does Mr. Dare mean by "we can take care of our own"? Where do you see discrimination (based on race, disabilities, socioeconomics, etc.) factoring into the history of SE MI regional transit?*
- *How can we work to heal the division between city and suburbs in SE MI?*

Heart and sole: Detroiter walks 21 miles in work commute

- Bill Laitner, Detroit Free Press, 2/10/15

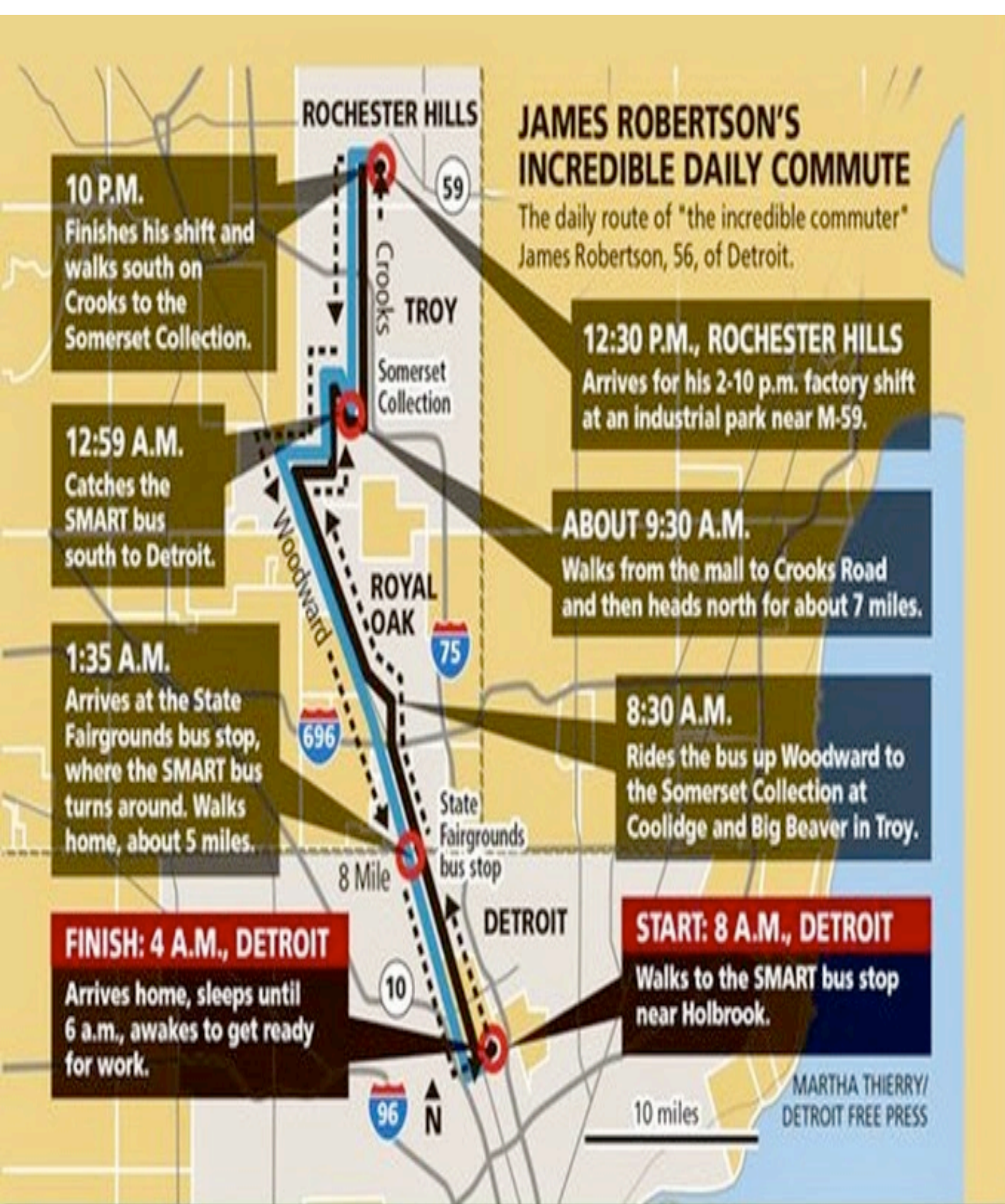
Leaving home in Detroit at 8 a.m., James Robertson doesn't look like an endurance athlete. Pudgy of form, shod in heavy work boots, Robertson trudges almost haltingly as he starts another workday. But as he steps out into the cold, Robertson, 56, is steeled for an Olympic-sized commute. Getting to and from his factory job 23 miles away in Rochester Hills, he'll take a bus partway there and partway home. And he'll also walk an astounding 21 miles.

Five days a week. Monday through Friday.

It's the life Robertson has led for the last decade, ever since his 1988 Honda Accord quit on him. Every trip is an ordeal of mental and physical toughness for this soft-spoken man with a perfect attendance record at work. Robertson's daunting walks and bus rides, in all kinds of weather, also reflect the challenges some metro Detroiters face in getting to work in a region of limited bus service, and where car ownership is priced beyond the reach of many.

As hard as Robertson's morning commute is, the trip home is even harder. [...]

- *What would change in your life if you had a 4 hour commute each way?*
- *Are you surprised to learn that Mr. Robertson's story is commonplace in our community?*
- *Would you feel differently about Mr. Robertson's story if he was Jewish?*



The daily route of "the incredible commuter" James Robertson, 56, of Detroit. (Photo: Detroit Free Press)