



Point Person: Our Q&A with Gary Thomas of DART

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The president and executive director of Dallas Area Rapid Transit, Gary Thomas was elected this year's chairman of the American Public Transportation Association. The group held its annual legislative meeting in Washington last week and pressed the case to renew a funding formula for transit through Congress' next highway bill. Points asked Thomas to discuss that, plus the fairness of subsidies, ridership projections and Green Line surprises.

Should motorists mind that some of their gasoline taxes support bus and rail transit systems, especially at a time when states struggle to pay for badly needed bridges and highways?

No, because the fact is that citizens in every city with public transit benefit from it, even if they're not able to use it. We give people a choice on how they commute to work and other places. Some of those people will take transit, getting them out of their cars and off the roads, freeing up that capacity for others.

The typical transit commuter is heavily subsidized by government, which bugs some lawmakers. How do you win them over?

Remember, roads are heavily supported through various public funding sources other than gas taxes. Local streets and roads are almost always paid for through the general funds of local budgets. But transit is much more than just moving people from Point A to B. It's about creating jobs during construction and connecting people to jobs and, with that, opportunities for a higher quality of life. More than 200,000 jobs are within a half-mile of the Green Line alone. Every major medical center in Dallas is served by transit. That means access to jobs, [higher education](#) and health care. Transit is an essential service.

Does it make your job harder that many cities have experienced a ridership slump?

Actually, ridership is up. According to the latest American Public Transportation Association data, Americans took 10.4 billion trips on public transit in 2011. That's a 2.3 percent increase over 2010. DART's ridership is growing, as well, and that includes our bus service. We think that trend will continue as we expand rail service to [Irving](#) and [Rowlett](#).

DART's latest light-rail numbers show Red Line business bouncing back, if I read them correctly, but not the Blue Line. What does that say about our community?

Ridership is increasing on the Red Line on weekdays and weekends. We think that's because the economy is improving and because there are a lot of good destinations on the Red Line, the [Dallas Zoo](#) among them. We think the improving economy will help grow Blue Line ridership, especially at the south end of the line. Remember, more than 70 percent of our trips are work trips. If people aren't working, they're not riding.

What has surprised you — good or bad — about response to the Green Line since service reached the northern suburbs and Pleasant Grove?

We're happy with the ridership growth on the Green Line. We're not only bringing in new commuters from Pleasant Grove and Carrollton-[Farmers Branch](#) to downtown, we're also seeing great ridership to the Southwestern Medical District/Parkland Station. Our new 703 Parkland Shuttle is moving more than 5,000 riders a day from the station to the medical district.

In the longer term, 20 to 50 years, we need to look at development around the stations, especially the Green Line. There's a lot going on at Parkland, and we don't see that slowing. We also see a lot of potential at Baylor as it continues to expand. We'll become as well known for providing transportation to the major noncentral-business-district activity centers as we are now for our connections to downtown.

One promise of rail transit has been development around DART stations, but things have been painfully slow, especially retail. Have boosters been too optimistic?

I don't think so. I think developers, like all of us, have been hard hit by the lousy economy of the past several years. We're just starting to come out of it, and already we are seeing more interest and activity in and around our stations. I think we'll see new projects, as well as some of the planned projects come back.

Regional planners hope to see Cotton Belt service across North Dallas to D/FW Airport using DART right of way and tapping the land value of developers for financing. The concept is untried. What odds do you give it of working?

I don't set odds. One of our strengths over the years, and one of Dallas' traditional strengths, has been to accomplish what people said couldn't be done. We have to explore all funding opportunities and be creative in our thinking, and that is exactly what's happening.

How and when should we assess whether stepped-up security on trains and buses is working?

Our initial, informal reports are positive. Our customers tell us we're making a difference, and they like the increased security presence. It will take some time to see longer-term results. We still have some initiatives we want to introduce in the next several weeks and months.

When you meet someone who could use DART to get to work, but doesn't, what do you that person

They should join me on board. They're missing out on a great ride.

This Q&A was conducted and condensed by Dallas Morning News editorial writer Rodger Jones. His email address is rmjones@dallasnews.com. Gary Thomas can be reached at dartinfo@dart.org.



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