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DART cities aren't DART's only financial supporters



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The main purpose of this blog post is to let [Duncanville](#) City Council member Grady Smithey have his say on the bus-to-rail service [DART](#) is now providing in [Mesquite](#). It's Smithey's response to [Plano](#) Mayor Phil Dyer's letter that criticized a [DMN editorial that supported the new service](#).

The issue is fairness, or "equity," for DART cities, and it's one that pushes people's buttons, as you could see in the comments to [the item Michael Lindenberger posted on the Dyer letter](#).

Dyer is crying foul, but Smithey, a long-time transportation leader, isn't having it.

Before I post the letter, here's some background that I factored into the editorial (which I wrote). Three things:

1) Dyer's call for regionalism is a worthy but painfully elusive goal. After watching different versions of local-op funding plans disintegrate in three Legislatures in a row, 2005-2007, I'm highly skeptical that a new

regional transportation template can be placed over the metro area. Not if money is concerned, and this is all about money.

Consider that the local-option plan merely wanted to let voters decide community-by-community whether to raise money for rail and/or roads. And there was not enough agreement in the D-FW delegation to get that through the Legislature and before voters. The spectrum of community interests could not be satisfied in Austin, and I see little appetite on any lawmaker's part to gird for this fight again.



Meanwhile, DART is feeling choked off financially. The region's population and economic growth is occurring outside the 13 member cities. I think it would be folly for the transit agency or its supporters to spurn "workaround" opportunities while hoping for the regionalism bug to spread.

I think it's a long-shot that a non-DART city would vote today to ante up a penny sales tax (even if it had room under the cap) in return for a promise for rail service some day. Opponents would cite the case of Addison . Addison is a founding DART member city and has been waiting for rail since 1983. There's no guarantee rail will ever serve that community. The unprecedented Cotton Belt financing model may be the only option; if that concept works -- tapping land values to fund the project -- maybe it could fund an extension on DART right of way to Allen and McKinney.

That's why the editorial mentioned "finding a way" to serve those communities. I think success hinges on being more strategic. It's no less ambitious.

2) Residents of the 13 DART cities are ill-served if their transit agency is oblivious to their needs outside the boundaries. I use the Bush Station on the DART Red Line. Plenty of workers get off there to get to their jobs at nearby offices and stores, including Fry's in Plano, where I walk to shop.

But what if Fry's picked up and moved north to Allen, as so many other stores have done? These workers would be SOL without a car, since DART can't go north of Plano. Soon, DART may have an agreement with a shuttle service that does a loop through Allen, with a pickup at the Parker Road station. Good.

Transit should figure out where people need to go and find a way to meet their needs. Otherwise, every hourly worker in a retail-intensive area like Allen will have to have a parking space and a lane of concrete to get there.

3) Months ago I was at a hearing in Plano on DART's upcoming pilot program to charge "outsiders" to park at rail stations. The audience included a couple of old grumps (takes one to know one!) who made sure everyone knew they resented non-DART residents freeloading on parking lots paid by DART sales taxes.

There was a lively response from actual DART users -- which these guys were not -- who drove in from other areas. One reminded the audience that the DART rail system would not have been built without hundreds of millions in federal funds, a source that includes *everyone's* taxes.

A second DART rider pressed the point that people who work in DART cities but come from outside the area -- about 52 percent of the 13-city workforce, according to DART's own reckoning -- indeed pay DART taxes with every purchase they make within the service area.

So both "outsiders" asserted that they were indeed DART taxpayers.

Which is Grady Smithey's point exactly. Here is the text of his response to Plano's Mayor Dyer:

All Funding Sources for DART Should be Recognized and Credited

As the only remaining co-founder of the Dallas Regional Mobility Coalition and a transportation planner since my first term on the Duncanville City Council in 1984, I feel compelled to speak on this issue.

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In his criticism of the DART- city of Mesquite transit agreement, Mayor Dyer of Plano buys into the common myth regarding the financing of the DART system. He seems to believe that only 13 cities are funding the system. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Let us examine then exactly the sources of DART system funding. For 15 years, 1983 through 1998, I commuted into the city of Dallas to work, and I paid DART's one cent sales tax on lunches and all other taxable purchases I made there. In that respect, I was typical of most Duncanville citizens in that 92% of all primary wage earners and 84% of all secondary wage earners also commuted, most into the DART cities.

Mayor Dyer, those sales taxes we paid should be recognized and credited toward building and maintaining the DART system.

There is one paramount truth which is generally overlooked in these equity discussions. Cities do not pay - they only collect - sales taxes. How much of that \$59 million collected in Plano was paid by non-residents? Quite a large amount, I would wager, given the number of non-DART city residents in your Parker Road lot each day.

In the 13 years I represented a cluster of five cities on the south side of Dallas County on the Regional Transportation Council of the North Central Texas Council of Governments, I was repeatedly told to be a regionalist in my approach to transportation funding. Much to my dismay, I found out that regionalism almost always meant sending most of our funding to the northern, fastest-growing suburbs, which had the ability to overmatch the RTC contributions.

We created the DRMC to rectify the imbalance of state transportation funds which went to Houston in the 1980s but failed to recognize the similar north-to-south imbalance in our own region. To date, that has been DRMC's greatest failure.

Plano was blessed by location, good political leadership and good city management and is able to generate \$59 million a year for DART with a one cent sales tax. We are not so fortunate on the south side of Dallas. A one cent sales tax in my city generates about \$3.3 million a year.

Your city's tax rate is considerably lower than mine as well. I would be happy to trade, but I don't think you would want to do that.

Knowing that light rail is too expensive, now \$85 million per mile, for most of the non-served suburbs, we tried to get the state Legislature to raise the sales tax cap by a half cent to fund commuter rail. The Legislature insisted on a survey to see if non-DART city citizens would vote to pay a one-half cent or one cent in additional sales tax to fund expansion of DART. In our area, 72 percent were willing to pay one-half cent and 60 percent were willing to pay one cent.

Armed with this data we asked for an up or down vote in the non-served cities to join or contract with DART. State Legislators, led by your Plano-based state senator, refused to let that vote be taken. Little wonder that we concluded that the current DART cities did not want us to have mass transit. Surely you can understand that your latest letter only strengthens that perception on our part.

While we are on this subject, we need to remember that 20 percent of the Federal Gasoline Tax of 18.4 cents goes to the mass transit fund. DART recently received \$700 million from those contributions that your citizens and mine made when they gassed up their vehicles.

I appreciate all that your city and the 12 others have done to create and finance DART. On the other hand, in 1983, when faced with a promise of only bus service for 25 years, my citizens turned down DART membership twice, the first time by 110 votes and the second by 4,000. Democracy was, and is, alive in Duncanville, and the voters sent us an unmistakable message with that second vote.

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We are still searching some 29 years later for a means to be a part of a regional mass transit system. Short-sighted views on equity which ignore all of the contributions of non-DART city residents to the creation and sustenance of the DART light rail system are not helpful in this process.

A slavish adherence to the idea of punishing the residents of those cities for exercising their democratic right not to join DART some 29 years ago insures that a complete regional mass transit system will never exist.

Grady W. Smithey, Jr. Secretary,
DRMC and Duncanville City Councilman

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