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Nevermind DART's expansion to suburbs, why can't it grow riders in Dallas?



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I've been away for a few days and this blog has been popping in my absence. I thought I'd jump in on the debate since everyone seems to be having so much fun.

I am just back from Northern California, and have a few things to say about the San Francisco transit system. I think they bear on the question that Grady Smithey and Phil Dyer have been talking about on the blog -- with ample amplification from Rodger and me, as well.

The focus has been on whether DART is doing the right [thing by letting Mesquite buy into the system on the cheap](#), paying a pittance to get a tiny slice of service. [Dyer, the mayor of Plano, argues](#) that after nearly 30 years of dedicating a penny sales tax to growing DART, cities like his aren't happy to see Mesquite get to suddenly be allowed to order a la carte.

[Smithey argues that cities that voted to stay out of DART](#) shouldn't be punished by being denied service from the agency, since after all its residents often work in downtown Dallas and therefore chip in by paying a penny sales tax themselves.

Leaving aside for a moment the big question -- whether the piecemeal, workaround solutions that Rodger and Smithey favor in Mesquite and elsewhere are good ideas -- I think it's clear that the always interesting and frequently right Smithey makes a weak case this time, when he notes that he paid Dallas sales taxes when visiting the city.

The reason cities like Dyer and Dallas feel protective of DART is not because their residents are uniquely charged that extra penny of tax. In fact, we pay 8.25 percent sales tax in just about every community of any size in the Metroplex, whether that city is a member of DART or not.

Mr. Smithey's Duncanville is no exception.

The difference is in how the taxes are used. When voters in Duncanville and Mesquite, and other area cities, voted to stay out of DART they were, as Smithey notes, exercising their democratic rights to choose.

And they chose to spend the money -- collected from themselves as well as any visitors from Dallas or other cities -- on something besides DART.

DART member cities, as Dyer points out, collect the same sales taxes as most area non-member cities but dedicate a full penny to build out the DART system.

Smithey would have us believe that just because residents from all over visit member cities and do some shopping there, they are all equally invested in DART. They aren't. Those cities where residents voted against DART opted to instead let the burden be borne by cities who denied themselves the opportunity to spend the money on other needs.

But on a deeper level, I wonder if this debate over whether and how DART should race to expand its system to reach communities on its borders is not in fact obscuring a more important and more difficult point.

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Transportation writer Michael Lindemberger, reporter Theodore Kim and editorial writer Rodger Jones cover the subject from tollways to traffic, roads to rail. They invite tips and feedback from decision-makers and commuters alike.

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It's true that the area's population is growing in the suburbs, **but it's also true that after nearly 30 years of spending and building, DART is losing ground in the one city where it has the most advantages, the city of Dallas.**

That's a question that is rarely addressed at DART. **Why are fewer people in the city of Dallas riding DART -- buses or rails -- today than 10 years ago? 20 years ago?** (See stats below.)

Some observations from my trip to San Francisco this week help focus this question, and the challenge for DART.

Transit is redundant in San Francisco. We hear a lot about efficiency from DART, and can see it most clearly in the agency's steady move to eliminate redundancy. For instance, as it has opened the Green Line it has worked overtime to reduce, modify or eliminate bus service in places where it feels that passengers could opt instead to use the new trains.

That makes sense on one level: In an era of scant resources, you have to spend the money you have wisely. But it also means that trips that are easier for bus passengers get swapped out for trips that boost rail ridership, but may involve new transfers, longer walks or fewer times to choose from.

When I stepped off CalTrain in downtown San Francisco, having just ridden in from Palo Alto, I was in a situation only tourists with nothing in mind other than urban exploration can truly enjoy: I had no idea where to go or what to do to get me there.

That was fine by me, as I figured any direction on a sunny day in San Francisco was as good as the other. Part of the blissful confusion stemmed from the fact that I saw light rail cars sliding by, buses, streetcars, taxis, waves of cyclists, and even a rental go-kart with a helmeted mother and toddler roaring past.

I made use of my iPhone transit navigator and, as I found throughout the day, there was almost always more than one way -- often three or four -- to use transit to get to where I was going. That meant I never waited more than a few minutes at a stop.

It occurred to me that redundancy was in fact the great result of all that transit spending. And judging from the fact that the trains, buses, streetcars and light rail were all nearly full each time, the extra choices didn't have to lead to empty cars ghosting by. Instead, the more options you have, the more likely you are to use transit.

Could it be that redundancy creates efficiency? Sure seemed like it there.

Who uses all that transit? It's not just tourists like me. In 2010, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that there were about 434,000 workers 16 or older living in the city. One out of every three of them typically went to work and back on transit. That was roughly true for every age group.

In 2010 about 549,000 workers lived in the city of Dallas, DART's most transit-friendly city. Only 21,000 of us take transit of any kind to work and back. That's just one worker out of every 25 or so, or 4.2 percent.

Obviously, San Francisco has an advantage -- all those workers live within 49 square miles, whereas Dallas' workers are spread out over [341 square miles](#).

On the other hand, Houston spans 600 square miles and yet about 45,000 of its 968,000 workers take transit to work and back each day. That nearly one in 20, or 4.8 percent. (They are also slightly more likely than us to carpool.)

As DART races to expand its system to suburban cities where the population has moved, and to member cities like Irving that have been waiting for so long for rail service, it wears a lodestone around its neck that none of those improvements are likely to make lighter: It still hasn't managed to persuade very many of those already living in its core area to ride its trains and buses.

That's a grim fact that is too seldom discussed at DART.

Rather than -- or maybe just in addition to -- asking itself how it can keep up with the population moving outside of its core area, shouldn't DART be asking itself why in the world, after 30 years, 19 out of every 20 workers in its most populous, most urban city, still shun DART entirely?

After all, Houston is no less dense, and relies almost entirely on buses.

(I promised the stats about historical Dallas transit use: In 1990, before a single rail station opened, [6.7 percent of the city's commuters](#) used transit. And in 2000, 5.5 percent of Dallas city residents with jobs used transit to commute. As stated above, the city is at 4.2 percent now.

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