

## Garland officials upset with Mesquite's DART buy-in

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Garland has two rail stations and the full run of Dallas Area Rapid Transit bus and paratransit services. It probably isn't losing a single rider to the bus route that debuted last month near downtown Mesquite.

But when Garland's city leaders brought the transit agency to the table to discuss that new route last week, emotions ran from jealousy to the hurt of betrayal.

Mesquite is covering all operational costs — more than \$300,000 a year — and riders there are paying a premium to link to available seating on the Green Line rail service.

But Garland officials say that cost pales in comparison to their investment of a penny sales tax over three decades. Furthermore, Garland leaders allege that by not choosing DART, neighboring Mesquite has that same penny available to gain competitive advantage.

"We've paid somewhere between \$300 million and \$500 million over the history of DART to build the infrastructure," Garland council member John Willis said. "It's money that we could have used here in Garland. But we didn't have that option."

Willis, like the two council members who called DART to Garland City Hall, represents a district that has lost retail to Mesquite's thriving Town East shopping area.

"We relied on DART to try to provide that kind of economic development here," Willis said.

Mesquite officials say the "quality of life" sales tax it opted for in lieu of membership in DART is now being applied to transit catered to the city's needs. The economic development tools used at Town East, they say, are available to any city.

Allen and McKinney

The competitive undercurrent is also a point of concern in northern member cities as Allen, McKinney and others look at Mesquite's deal as an entry point for their own discussions about tying into regional transit.

Mesquite has referenced it as a model. DART does not. Mesquite's 100 or so daily riders help fill empty seats on Green Line trains. Those seats don't exist at rush hour on the Red Line in Plano.

"This is not the standard-bearer for all contract service from this point forward," DART Executive Director Gary Thomas told the Garland council last Monday. "This service is unique to this deal."

The available capacity lessens the impact fee to about \$3 for the Mesquite bus connection from Hanby Stadium to the Lawnview Station. A daily local pass within DART's service area costs \$4. Riding the Mesquite route and tying into DART is \$7 a day.

"If someone were trying to connect at Parker Road or the Bush Turnpike, it would be a different deal," Thomas said. "Because the capacity's much, much less at those particular stations, we'd have to think about that impact fee in a much different way."

Parking fees

DART this month started charging those who live outside its service area parking lot fees of \$2 a day or \$40 a month at northernmost rail stations. Thomas said about 840 people pay to park.

That helps solve member-city riders' anxiety about equity but does little to soothe the concerns expressed by officials in Garland and Plano about hundreds of millions invested long-term via their transit sales taxes.

Allen City Manager Peter Vargas acknowledged that DART member cities have expressed concerns about Allen's bid for service since it currently does not pay into the system. He remains hopeful.

"That's been a constant theme that we've found," Vargas said. "In order to have service, you've got to pay. And we're willing to do that."

Midway through the last decade, DART extended its reach by attaching to the Trinity Railway Express to the west and the Denton County Transit Authority, or DCTA, to the northwest.

Connections to downtown Fort Worth and the University of North Texas are seen as beneficial for cities that pay the penny to DART. Mass transit could be similarly advantageous to people who work and shop at Allen's new retail centers.

There is no similar regional perk with peak-traffic-time runs to and from Hanby Stadium.

"We have to figure this out," Willis said. "The model being used in Mesquite, I don't believe it captures the fundamental underlying fairness of how we as a group have paid to build something for the region."

Fellow council member Larry Jeffus pointed out that while Mesquite had every opportunity to craft its service, Garland was not asked to weigh in.

"That's the whole purpose of transparency in government," he said. "I would love to have had that discussion on this."

Two on the Garland council said they'd heard that Mesquite was pumping up its ridership numbers to make the experiment seem a success. Thomas said he was not aware of anything like that, and Mesquite officials adamantly denied the accusation.

"It is ridiculous for anyone to believe that the city of Mesquite or anyone else is paying people to ride our shuttle service," Assistant City Manager Jerry Dittman said.

A quest to fill seats

DART has long sought to find new revenue sources and fill available seats. It also has an objective to be *the* regional transit authority.

In Garland, Thomas reiterated a dislike for a system that leaves residents wending their way through multiple transit providers.

Aligning with Mesquite quiets that city's overtures about developing its own transit authority. Mesquite had talked with Forney and Terrell and had approved public money for a study toward privatized rail service.

"All options are on the table," Dittman said of the city's vision for providing light rail. "But the preferred option is to find a way for DART to do it because they have the expertise, staff and support facilities.

"Unfortunately, right now there is no mechanism for DART to deliver a light-rail connection to a nonmember city unless they join at the full penny," he added. "But there is a mechanism, a la DCTA, to connect to another transit authority."

Dittman said Mesquite is very cognizant of and sensitive to the fairness and equity issues raised in Garland.

He knows the deal has ignited a much larger debate on transit equity and expansion in the region.

"But someone had to be first," he said.

A look at the cities' DART costs and benefits		
	Garland	Mesquite
Investment	1-cent sales tax, roughly \$20 million per year	\$300,000 a year
Fare	\$4 per daily local pass; single trip and system fares also available	\$7
Service	Two rail stations, three transit centers, 20 bus routes including the system's busiest express route, and full paratransit services	1 nonstop bus line offering peak time trips, 14 each weekday, between Hanby Stadium and the Lawnview Station
Ridership	2.7 million bus and rail riders in 2011, according to DART. Nearly 1,000 registered paratransit riders in Garland responsible for 5,600 pickups in February.	100 per day
Representation	Full DART board representative and a second seat shared with smaller cities; member city since 1983	None

