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May 2012

Passenger Rail Article

Passenger rail expansion in Dallas-Fort Worth: Transit agencies work together to plan and build passenger rail in North Texas

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Julie Sneider, assistant editor

... native Jim Cline recalls the days before the Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART) system existed.

It was the early 1980s, and expressways were under rapid construction to accommodate the Dallas-Fort Worth region's sprawling growth. As a solution to the increasingly heavy traffic congestion, DART launched the first phase of suburban bus service in spring 1984; by September of that year, DART's board began developing plans to introduce rail service to the region.

In 1996, DART launched the Trinity Railway Express (TRE) commuter-rail service between Dallas and Fort Worth; today, DART jointly owns TRE with the Fort Worth Transportation Authority, known as The T. In June 1996, DART opened the first 11.2 miles of its 20-mile light-rail starter system, and by July, initial ridership had exceeded expectations.

Cline, a registered professional engineer, remembers the community debate over whether the cost of building and maintaining rail service would be worth the public investment: Would enough Texans give up driving their vehicles to sustain rail transportation over the long term?

"I remember the news was filled with editorials and interviews with people who said folks from Texas would never get out of their trucks to ride rail," Cline says. "From what we've seen, that's not the truth. ... Today, we're seeing people vote with their feet by riding the trains."

Cline is in a position to know something about North Texas' public transportation.

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He's been on the front lines of it for the past two years as president of the [Denton County Transportation Authority \(DCTA\)](#), which in June 2011 launched the A-train, a 21-mile regional rail system connecting Denton and Dallas counties. Prior to working for DCTA, Cline served for 12 years as director of public works and transportation for the city of Irving, Texas. Before that, he oversaw municipal transit and traffic operations for the city of Beaumont.

On a personal level, Cline views the region's future transportation needs through the actions of his son, a high-school senior who regularly rides the DART Green Line to his internship at a company in downtown Dallas. For his son's generation, rail transit is catching on, Cline says.

"They see the benefits of not being stuck in traffic, of saving money and, with their smart phones, using the time it takes to travel as productive time by keeping up with their friends and doing work," he says.

Transit's appeal to the Millennial generation combined with Dallas-Fort Worth's explosive growth trend — the North Texas population is projected to increase from 6.7 million today to nearly 10 million in 2035 — has local transit agencies and regional planners looking for additional transportation options, Cline says.

Keeping Up With Growth

Cline, DART President Gary Thomas and The T President Dick Ruddell say their agencies are doing what they can to keep up. Even during a time when local, state and federal funding sources are skin-tight, the agencies have continued to plan, build and launch new transit-rail service as part of a bigger-picture transportation solution to managing the region's ongoing influx of new residents.

"When you have transit authorities like DART that are growing as fast as we are and still can't keep up with [the area's growth], I think the challenge for our regional leaders and visionary thinkers is to determine what is the next step," says Thomas. "How do we provide transportation choices and, at the same time, balance this desire for urban sprawl?"

For its part in tackling sprawl-related transportation challenges, DCTA began operating the A-train commuter rail under a contract with Herzog Transit Services in June 2011. The service, which runs parallel to Interstate-35E, connects riders in Denton County north of Dallas to DART's Green Line. The A-train stops at five stations — two in Denton and three in Lewisville — and connects with DART's Green Line at the Trinity Mills Station in Carrollton. From there, riders can take the Green Line to downtown Dallas, the city's medical district, Pleasant Grove, Fair Park, and DART's Red, Orange and Blue lines and the TRE.

Later this year, DCTA — which currently operates diesel rail cars previously used by TRE — will introduce to its fleet 11 new GTW 2/6 diesel-electric rail vehicles supplied by Stadler Rail. DCTA is seeking an Alternative Vehicle Technology waiver from the Federal Railroad Administration to allow the Stadler GTW vehicles, which feature alternate crashworthy elements, in service concurrently with its fleet of traditional rail cars. If all goes well with the waiver, the new vehicles could be in service by this summer, Cline says.

So far, A-train's ridership is a mix of business professionals who live in the

outlying suburbs and work in Dallas, and students and faculty on their way to and from the University of North Texas (UNT). The train transports an average of 1,600 passengers a day — "a good ridership, but we'd like to see more folks on our trains as we move forward," Cline says. To help boost ridership numbers, DCTA officials are considering adding a midday run that would provide more options for part-time workers and UNT students. Currently, the train runs during morning and late afternoon rush hours Monday through Friday, and Friday and Saturday evenings.

Adding Light-Rail Options

While A-train riders anticipate more options between Denton County and Dallas, DART continues to plan for and open new segments of its now 72-mile light-rail system. The 28-mile, 20-station Green Line was completed in December 2010. A \$1.8 billion project completed on time and under budget, the line runs from Carrollton southeast through downtown Dallas to Buckner, and transports riders to and from residential areas, various work centers, Love Field, Southwestern Medical District/Parkland Hospital and Baylor University Medical Center. Construction was funded primarily by the 1 percent sales tax collected in the cities DART services and a \$700 million Full Funding Grant Agreement from the [Federal Transit Administration \(FTA\)](#). DART also received \$78.4 million from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

Also in 2010, DART's board revised its 20-year financial plan to incorporate sales tax revenue that was lower than previously expected. Revenue estimates in the revised plan are about \$8 billion lower over the 20-year period — which had an impact on project schedules, Thomas says.

"To make everything work, [the new forecast] meant the long-range projects in the 2025-to-2030 time frame got pushed out five to 10 years," he says. "But projects in the near term are still on track and on board."

Those near-term projects include completion of the 14-mile Orange Line, which will run parallel with the Green Line through downtown Dallas to Bachman Station in Northwest Dallas. From there, the line runs northwest to Las Colinas Urban Center and on to Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport (DFW).

DART is on track to open the Orange Line's first leg on July 30, the line's second leg on Dec. 3, and the third and final leg to DFW in late 2014. On April 9, DART ran its first light-rail test train over a five-mile segment of the Orange Line in Irving.

Meanwhile, on April 25, the agency ran its first test train on the five-mile extension of the Blue Line between downtown Garland and downtown Rowlett. A design-build project, that extension is scheduled to open on Dec. 3, the same day as the opening of the Orange Line's second leg.

"And then, we hope to have a Blue Line extension to the University of North Texas-Dallas campus in South Dallas under contract no later than the end of this year as we head toward a 2015 or 2016 service date," says Thomas. "And that's actually moving that [project's time frame] up; it was in our financial plan for 2019."

Streetcar Line in the Works

Also on DART's agenda: a 1.6-mile streetcar project being planned in conjunction with the [North Central Texas Council of Governments \(NCTCOG\)](#) and the city of Dallas. That project, which received a \$23 million Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) grant, will run from the Union Station area in downtown Dallas to nearby Oak Cliff. In July 2011, the project received its environmental clearance from the FTA.

Meanwhile, DART has pushed out the time frame to complete its share of the 62-mile Cotton Belt Rail Corridor from 2025-2030 to 2038. The corridor will represent "true" regional rail in that it would serve three of North Texas' largest counties, 12 cities and DFW, says Tom Shelton, senior program manager at NCTCOG, which is taking the lead in developing a mix of public-private financing options rather than relying only on traditional revenue sources, such as taxes, to develop the corridor.

Currently, NCTCOG is working with a national consulting team that's drafting some specific "innovative financing" recommendations for building, operating and maintaining passenger-rail in the Cotton Belt Corridor. The possibilities include enhanced funding related to operations such as higher farebox recovery, as well as "value capture" associated with real estate development opportunities along the Cotton Belt Corridor, according to a December 2011 NCTCOG report.

Under the regional long-range rail plan, DART would develop the corridor's eastern half and The T, the western half. DART's end of the line would connect the Red Line light-rail corridor to DFW.

A Milestone for Tex Rail

In late March, The T officials marked a milestone on their end of the corridor when the FTA gave approval to begin preliminary engineering and design work on the Tarrant Express, or TEX Rail project, a 38-mile passenger-rail service from southwest Fort Worth to Grapevine and on to DFW.

The FTA's blessing "was a really big step" because it put TEX Rail into "the pipeline" for possible federal funding of up to 50 percent of the \$758 million project, says The T's Ruddell, who expects preliminary engineering to be completed in about a year. Before the design phase can begin, however, The T must sign access agreements with DART, Union Pacific Railroad and Fort Worth & Western Railroad so that TEX Rail trains can operate over their tracks.

"The discussions are ongoing with all those entities and we hope to get final signatures on the agreements this year," Ruddell says.

As rail service expands regionally, agency execs also continue to focus on ensuring such service is seamless from the riders' perspective as they transfer from one system to another.

"Our work with the other agencies has progressed unabated" in recent years, says Ruddell. "All three boards have negotiated and passed resolutions to have interlocal agreements with all three agencies to recognize each others' fares, to work toward seamless transportation and to plan the build-out of seamless rail throughout the region."

DART and The T's joint operation of the TRE set an example for the agencies to follow as rail service spreads regionally, say Ruddell and Thomas.

"To have two transit authorities with co-ownership on a single corridor ... is not normal, and that line is pretty darn seamless," Thomas says. "When people come across the TRE and get on a light-rail train or they go to the west and get off the TRE in Fort Worth and get on a bus, it's not a big deal. The fare they got on the TRE pretty much gets them anywhere else, so that's worked pretty well. The management and policy leaders for both agencies have worked very hard to make sure the customers are in the forefront of our focus."

Collaboration also helps to save money. One example: TRE and DCTA jointly employ a single service provider — Herzog — for both rail corridors as one way to stretch increasingly tight funding.

The two agencies are saving about \$1.5 million annually through the shared contract as well as shared resources such as liability insurance and dispatch services, says Norma Navarro, vice president of commuter rail and railroad management for DART. And, once TEX Rail begins operation (slated for 2016), it likely will be operated under the same contract as TRE and DCTA.

"Every new agency wants their own brand when they do a startup, but what DCTA realized was that because DART owned the corridor and because we could cover them under the existing contract [with TRE under Herzog], the savings for dispatch overhead and insurance liability allowed DCTA to put more service on the street than they thought they would be able to do," says DART Executive Vice President of Growth and Regional Development Tim McKay.

Such teamwork will be crucial as passenger rail spreads across the region over the next 25 years. According to the NCTCOG's regional transportation plan known as "Mobility 2035," passenger rail will play a vital role in helping manage Dallas-Fort Worth's traffic congestion and air quality issues. The plan delineates 115 miles of rail expansion as "regionally significant," McKay says.

In preparing for future trends, NCTCOG staffers are taking into consideration the preferences of North Texas' younger generation of transit users.

"What we're finding is that the Millennials are preferring more of an urban lifestyle; they don't necessarily want the big yards and cars of the suburbs," says NCTCOG program manager Kevin Feldt.

Transit-Oriented Development

Whereas the regional rail services being built now will provide riders with transportation connections between their homes in outlying communities and Dallas/Fort Worth, future generations are more likely to choose homes in locations that have quick and easy access to transit options. As a result, the long-range plan adopts transit-oriented development "because we believe years from now the people who are actually going to use the facilities that we implement today are those younger ones who have a different perspective on lifestyle," Feldt says.

And for the most part, today's community, civic and business leaders seem to "get it" — that building more roadways alone won't be enough to handle the anticipated

increase in congestion, NCTCOG officials say. In fact, for some leaders — Fort Worth Mayor Betsy Price to name just one — rail can't be built fast enough. At a March meeting with The T's board and executives, Price complained that Tex Rail's 2016 timeframe for service to DFW was "unacceptable," according to an article in The Fort Worth Star-Telegram.

The mayor's impatience with the pace of TEX Rail is understandable when the region's long-term transportation needs are measured against projected growth trends. The Dallas-Fort Worth area will need about \$395.3 billion in transportation investments over the next 25 years, but NCTCOG is recommending just \$101.1 billion in projects "due to financial constraints," according to the Mobility 2035 report. Even if all recommended projects are built, congestion-related travel time is projected to jump 42 percent by 2035.

Making a Dent in Traffic Congestion

Although rail can't — and won't — be the only solution to North Texas' growing transportation needs, it will provide area residents with another travel option, regional planners and transit agency leaders say.

"You can't build enough infrastructure if you focus on lane miles for traffic," says McKay. "To be able to connect to three different [transit] systems gives people choices. They may not totally abandon their cars and become transit junkies, but it gives them choices if the weather is bad or traffic is bad or, frankly, if gas prices keep rising."



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