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Dallas still wed to its cars, but younger people riding trains, buses more

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The era of the automobile is ending, or at least losing its stranglehold on American commuters, federal transit officials claimed in Dallas on Monday.

“Americans’ travel habits are undergoing rapid change,” said Federal Rail Administrator Joseph Szabao. “That’s fact, not opinion. The average American drives 6 percent less than they did in 2004.”

The numbers are higher still for younger Americans, he said.

The average American drives 6 percent fewer miles today than in 2004,” he said. “But leading this trend are the 16- to 34-year-olds. From 2001 to 2009, this group reduced their vehicle-miles traveled by 23 percent and increased their average passenger miles traveled by trains and buses by a whopping 40 percent.”

“We’re talking about the next generation, for whom it is a badge of honor to not own a car. ... This is the future.”

The decline in miles driven has been felt across the country, including throughout rural and urban parts of Texas, thanks largely to the economic slowdown.

But talk of parking cars in favor of taking transit remains bold in Dallas, where 74 percent of workers who live in the city drive themselves to work and back each day. About 4.24 percent use bus, rail or other public transit, according to a 2010 estimate by the U.S. Census Bureau. That's a smaller percentage than in Houston, Los Angeles, Atlanta or Austin.

Younger people here, as elsewhere, do use transit more often. About 6.6 percent of Dallas teenagers with jobs use transit as their primary way to get to work and back, and another 5.4 percent of workers between 20 and 24 use transit.

Dallas Area Rapid Transit said it believes those numbers for all age groups will only go up as the system continues to expand. On Monday, DART president Gary Thomas said the more places that the agency's light rail service reaches, the more people he hears from who want it.

"Now that [North Texas residents] have a taste for what transit could mean in their lives, there is an insatiable desire for more of it," Thomas said. "We hear all the time, 'We need more of it, and we need it sooner.'"

DART trains will arrive in Irving this summer, when the first leg of the Orange Line opens, and the Blue Line will extend to downtown Rowlett in December.

The federal officials were in town Monday as part of the annual convention of the American Public Transportation Association, which DART is hosting this year. Thomas serves as the association's chairman for the year.

DART also announced Monday that it had designated DeSoto resident Don Johnson as its 250 millionth light rail passenger. Officials surprised Johnson on Monday morning with the announcement and will give him monthly passes for

July and free tickets to the Dallas Zoo and other destinations served by the rail system.

When it opened the first leg of the Red Line 16 years ago, DART officials acknowledged that persuading Texans to park their cars would be difficult — and time has proved them right.