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# Bus services from McKinney, Allen to Plano DART station still stalled

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Three years after almost \$1.8 million was approved for an experimental mass-transit link between low-income residents and jobs in several North Texas cities, no wheels are yet in motion.

The program is supposed to provide bus service between McKinney and Allen and the Parker Road Rapid Transit station in Plano. Federal funding took a year, but for 18 more months the project has been awaiting approval by Dallas Area Rapid Transit, which runs the transit station.

Allen and McKinney representatives were careful not to directly blame DART for the delay.

"It's been more than frustrating," said Allen City Manager Peter Vargas. "We've been ready to go for more than two years."

Allen has been waiting on DART to approve access before it can finalize details with its bus service. McKinney secured its service provider early this year.

But the agency is in no rush.

"The DART board is not going to make a quick decision which impacts the agency negatively for years to come," DART spokesman Mark Ball said.

Allen and McKinney are not among the 13 DART member cities and therefore don't pay taxes for its services. Ball said DART has an obligation to first consider the effects on member cities.

DART is concerned about additional riders at the end-of-the-line station, which already exceeds seated capacity by more than 30 percent during peak periods. There is a chance, Ball said, that more Dallas and Richardson riders would be forced to stand, since McKinney and Allen riders would be some of the first to board southbound trains.

In December 2010, McKinney and Allen secured \$250,000 and \$645,000, respectively, from the North Central Texas Council of Governments. The organization provided the federal funds via a so-called Job Access/Reverse Commute grant, which helps low-income people with employment and helps other residents find suburban employment opportunities. The cities invested equal matching funds from their budgets.

Both proposed services were planned to run for three years and would carry riders from employment and retail areas in Allen and McKinney to the DART Parker Road station. After three years, the two cities were expected to decide whether they wanted to expand their relationships with DART.

Sherman-based Texoma Area Paratransit System was expected to operate the McKinney service, which would provide two buses running two morning and two evening routes. Collin County Area Transit was expected to run Allen's service, which would include two buses running at various times throughout the day. The Council of Governments, Allen and McKinney did not have estimates on how many people might be served.

Last year, a JA/RC grant helped fund Arlington's Ride2Work program, which gives low- and moderate-income residents a ride to work. Similarly, in 2006, Hurst, Euless and Bedford used a JA/RC grant to fund HEB Transit, which helps people without cars get to work.

DART's board has asked its staff to develop options that may include access fees. Once ideas have been vetted by the board and member cities, DART will present McKinney and Allen its options, Ball said.

But DART officials didn't always seem so hesitant to participate. In its application to secure funds from the North Central Texas Council of Governments, the city of McKinney included a copy of an email from Daniel Dickerson, DART's innovative-services manager.

"DART is agreeable with the concept and design," Dickerson said in the email about a letter of support.

Last week, Ball neither denied nor supported Dickerson's statement but said DART is focused on figuring out how nonmember cities help fund costs associated with adding riders.

Michael Morris, COG director of transportation, believes the projects were delayed because DART was confusing the requests with those of other nonmember

cities such as Mesquite, which was working to extend DART services into its city around the same time. But Allen and McKinney were seeking only access to DART's Plano facility, Morris said.

"I believe what held us up was there was some confusion on what [the service] was," said Morris, adding that the Council of Governments spent time explaining the purpose of the service to DART this spring. "We think we've made some headway ... with DART having a better understanding of what this is and isn't."

In March, DART established its first partnership with a nonmember city, Mesquite. An express bus service now shuttles riders between Mesquite's Hanby Stadium and Lawnview Station.

"Our anticipation was once they ... started contracting with other parties, hopefully, that would expedite things" with us, Vargas said.

About 18.3 percent of McKinney residents traveled to Plano for work and 7.6 percent traveled to Richardson, according to a 2004 COG study documented in the application.

"We're approaching this the right way," said Vargas, who expects to have completed negotiations within the next six months. "We just need to get started."