



Editorial: Bus relay from McKinney, Allen to DART rail only makes sense

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A company looking to increase market share has options that usually come with risk. Introducing products is one way. Expanding beyond geographic constraints is another.

The calculus changes for Dallas Area Rapid Transit. Rail and bus are pretty much it for products. Geography is constrained by where the tracks go and, importantly, by the politics involved when 13 cities have paid a 1 percent local sales tax for nearly three decades — and others have not.

DART officials see the problem. To thrive, they must reach more customers. To do that, they must spread their reach beyond 13 member cities. Constant fare increases and paid parking won't suffice.

This newspaper, long an advocate for a seamless regional transit network, was encouraged this year by DART's agreement with nonmember Mesquite for bus service to DART rail. Mesquite pays about \$300,000 for annual operations; riders kick in an extra \$3 per round trip.

So more potential customers have access to DART's light-rail system when stagnant ridership is a perpetual concern. It's a win-win, right?

That's what Allen and McKinney must have thought. Those booming, nonmember Collin County cities similarly hoped to start bus relays to the Parker Road Station at the northern end of DART's Red Line. They secured so-called Job Access/Reverse Commute grants and pledged matching city funds.

And they waited, and waited — about 18 months now since landing the federal grants, which cover a three-year pilot, if the cities and DART ever work things out. Deal-making can't begin until DART's board of directors approves a policy change, and so far that's where we idle.

Allen City Manager Peter Vargas has only good words for DART staff, which he calls "very receptive" to letting Allen and McKinney ferry workers to and from Parker Road. "From" is significant, because it means opening a rapidly growing job market to residents of Dallas, Richardson and other member cities.

Gary Thomas, DART's president and executive director, attributes the slow progress to the complexity in divining the proper impact fee to charge Allen and McKinney bus-rail commuters. Relatively speaking, Mesquite was simpler because the Green Line runs at lower capacity. This is not as true for the Red Line, especially around rush hours.

Imagine the hard feelings for Red Line riders in Plano and Richardson when their morning trains arrive already full.

Still, should something that makes so much sense take so long? More Red Line traffic could require more trains, which adds to the impact on DART, which factors into the elusive impact fee. Allen and McKinney have lined up bus service but can't move forward before DART's green light. Thomas says he hopes to have something for the board to consider by Thanksgiving.

It's a challenge, but not one beyond the cogitating skills of smart people who all say they want the same thing: greater regional mobility.

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Some DART basics

Origin: DART was created by voters and funded with a 1 percent local sales tax on Aug. 13, 1983.

Member cities: Addison, Carrollton, Cockrell Hill, Dallas, Farmers Branch, Garland, Glenn Heights, Highland Park, Irving, Plano, Richardson, Rowlett and University Park

Sales tax: Together, the 13 member cities collect and fund DART with about \$400 million per year from the 1 percent local sales tax.

Members' complaint: Cities that did not join DART often used some or all of that taxing authority for other needs, including economic development.

Things change: In March, DART established its first partnership with a nonmember city, Mesquite, for express bus service between Hanby Stadium and DART's Lawnview Station.

DART's concern: With ridership stagnant, how to further expand its network while treating the member cities, which supported the sales tax for so long, fairly.

