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Rail delays leave Fort Worth Transportation Authority 'at a tipping point'

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BY GORDON DICKSON
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Fort Worth Mayor Betsy Price wasn't in the mood for platitudes last spring when she took on the Fort Worth Transportation Authority over a stalled commuter rail line.

The T board's lack of urgency on the proposed 37-mile line connecting southwest Fort Worth to Dallas/Fort Worth Airport was unacceptable, she said. Some were even accusing Fort Worth of holding back mobility in the entire western half of the Metroplex.

Almost six months after that dressing-down, Price and other city leaders are openly expressing doubts about whether the T can evolve from a bus company into a 21st-century transportation provider.

"I will tell you publicly, right now, that it is very shaky, very dim," Price said when asked about her confidence in the T. "There are good people over there. They just have to get past the thinking that there are always excuses. I can't fault what happened in the past, but we are at a tipping point."

City officials have stepped in to save the TEX Rail commuter line from further delays. In July, the City Council formed a passenger rail working group -- made up of political and business leaders and planners -- to help the T work through problems.

The group will also push the T for quicker action on expanding bus and rail service to the fast-growing Alliance area in far north Fort Worth.

The North Central Texas Council of Governments and the Texas Department of Transportation are also helping to look for a private developer who can absorb some of the estimated \$758 million cost of the rail line -- and possibly extend the service northeast of DFW Airport to Dallas County cities such as Addison and Plano decades ahead of schedule.

Councilman Jungus Jordan said he is disappointed that the T hasn't expanded its services to better connect with other agencies, such as Dallas Area Rapid Transit, although he didn't lay all the blame on T President Dick Ruddell and his staff.

Jordan said the T leadership has lacked a mandate from the city's elected leaders -- until now.



View photos

Then and now

What's changed at the Fort Worth Transportation Authority during the past 10 years?

Ridership is up 17 percent, with 9.5 million passenger trips expected this year, compared to 8.1 million in 2002. A passenger trip is one ride on a bus, in a van pool, in a mobility-impaired vehicle or in another service offered by the T. However, the population of Fort Worth has grown about 38 percent during that time.

Finances are sound. About \$36.9 million is available for capital expenditures (including TEX Rail), according to the proposed 2013 budget. In 2002, the T had a deficit of \$2.5 million.

Regional expansion has been hit-or-miss. Lake Worth residents voted to leave the T in 2003, while Richland Hills residents voted twice (in 2004 and 2010) to stay. Bus service is mainly limited to the portion of Fort Worth inside Loop 820, with rider request in Richland Hills and paratransit in Blue

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"Dick is the person in charge, and he has been there. But quite frankly the T will not be able to do it on their own without the same effort from us. Up until now they've been a bus company, quite frankly, and it's time to move on beyond that," Jordan said.

"Now we've convinced the community we have a need for passenger rail, and we need to step forward and make that happen."

Over the next few months, the way that the T's leaders respond to complaints that they're not expanding their public transportation services aggressively enough will determine how much of a role the agency has in the region's long-term transit plan.

That includes developing roughly 240 miles of rail lines by 2035 in partnership with DART, the Denton County Transportation Authority and the council of governments.

For his part, Ruddell doesn't take the criticism personally, although he believes that some of the naysayers simply "don't understand the intricacies of getting through a new-starts process."

As vice chairman of government affairs for the American Public Transportation Association for three years beginning in the late 1990s, Ruddell closely tracked measures passed by Congress to weed out unworthy grant applications, he said.

"Over the past 10 years, it has become much more complicated," Ruddell said. "The whole system is designed to drop some projects out because they don't have enough money to fund all of them. Now, we're a couple of years from getting this grant approved. The next two years are very key."

Bumpy road to change

The T is reaching this delicate point in its history as Ruddell prepares to mark his 10th anniversary.

When he arrived in February 2003, he found that the T's nine-member board had just adopted a budget with a \$2.5 million deficit. Much of that first year was spent slashing services and cutting bus routes. Ridership dropped 17 percent from 2002 to 2004.

In his second year, Ruddell was asked to reorganize. Since its creation in 1983, the T had been staffed entirely by employees of a private company, Fort Worth-based McDonald Transit. But the T's board members wanted a president who answered only to them.

Ruddell set about creating a new administrative staff of himself and about 74 other former McDonald Transit employees who would answer to the T board.

He created new finance, human resources and other departments, as well as an employee retirement fund. McDonald Transit, meanwhile, continued to provide the T with roughly 300 of its ground-level employees, including drivers and mechanics.

The road to change has been bumpy.

In 2003, Lake Worth residents voted to leave the T, citing a perception that the city wasn't getting enough service for the half-cent sales tax required to be a member. Richland Hills residents voted in two elections to stay in despite lingering -- and vocal -- opposition. In 2008, the agency extended limited bus service to Arlington, but that experiment ended in 2011 because of low ridership.

Still, Ruddell and others point out that the T has much to be proud of in its effort to be regionally relevant.

More people are using buses, van pools and trains. The fleet is modern, and some buses have the technology to change traffic signals from red to green. In east Fort Worth, shelters have been installed with solar lighting and electronic boards that let riders know when the next bus will arrive.

On the Trinity Railway Express, which the T co-owns with DART, parking capacity has doubled at Tarrant County stations -- and the downtown Fort Worth station is a multimodal hub.

By April, the T expects to launch a bike-sharing program that could revolutionize how people move about the central city. The agency received a \$941,728 federal grant to start the program, which will initially include about 300 bikes available for rent at 30 stations.

Perhaps the T's greatest success the past decade was pitching the TEX Rail project to Grapevine, where voters agreed in late 2006 to a 1-cent sales tax increase that included three-eighths of a cent for

Mound. The Trinity Railway Express, which reached downtown Fort Worth in 2001, remains a vital connection to Dallas, with stops in Northeast Tarrant County. The TEX Rail project would connect Fort Worth to Grapevine and the north end of Dallas/Fort Worth Airport by 2016. Grapevine voters agreed to chip in a three-eighths-cent sales tax.

Dick Ruddell, now 65, became T president Feb. 1, 2003, with a \$137,000 annual salary. Today, his salary is \$170,000, and his contract runs through January 2015.

The Intermodal Transportation Center, which opened in 2001, housed only the Trinity Railway Express and Amtrak in 2002. Since then, the main downtown Fort Worth train station has become a hub of daily activity. It now features a Greyhound bus terminal, an Enterprise car rental counter and a Subway restaurant.

Do you agree with Fort Worth Mayor Betsy Price that North Texas is facing a mobility crisis?

- Yes. It's time to get serious.
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commuter rail. The T has collected \$37.9 million in Grapevine sales taxes since 2007.

Trouble with rail

But getting TEX Rail from the concept stage to construction is proving to be a bear.

Late last year, after about four years of study, the T applied for a \$415 million grant under the Federal Transit Administration's "new starts" program to cover nearly 55 percent of the estimated cost to begin TEX Rail.

Progress, right? Not so much.

In Dallas in February, FTA Administrator Peter Rogoff was asked about TEX Rail. He urged the T to pick up the pace or risk losing the chance for funding.

Rogoff said the T wouldn't be allowed to begin final design and right-of-way purchasing until agreements were reached with the three railroads that own the tracks -- Union Pacific, DART and Fort Worth & Western.

Price and City Council members were alarmed by Rogoff's words and, in March, the mayor publicly scolded the T board members.

"Some have even said the thing holding back mobility in the region as a whole is the western half of the Metroplex. That is not acceptable. Truth be told, I'm simply not satisfied with the progress, and I don't think the council is, either," Price said.

City leaders also sought details on a couple of controversies that were brewing in Fort Worth neighborhoods over the selection process for TEX Rail station sites. One of those neighborhoods is Mistletoe Heights, which falls in Councilman Joel Burns' district.

Burns lashed out at the T for its handling of a proposed station in the Medical District. The T moved slowly in securing land along 12th Avenue, he said, and when it was developed for hotel, retail and other uses, the site switched to one along Mistletoe Boulevard that many nearby residents oppose.

"This charade as public process is the most damaging, disappointing aspect of the entire multi-year process," Burns wrote in a June 20 letter to Ruddell and the T board. "We deserved better. I have growing misgivings about The T's ability to deliver on the TEX Rail project for a variety of reasons, in addition to its handling of the Medical District station."

Residents of the north-side and Diamond Hill neighborhoods also voiced concerns about the T's plans to move the proposed Stockyards station to the northwest corner of 28th Street and Decatur Avenue -- possibly displacing a tamale factory.

'Not our only job'

To keep the rail projects on track, the city formed a passenger rail working group that is chaired by Jordan and includes Price, Burns and Councilman Danny Scarth.

Other members are T board members Gary Cumbie, Rosa Navejar, Gary Havener and Steve Berry; Tarrant County Judge Glen Whitley; Fort Worth Chamber of Commerce President Bill Thornton; Fort Worth Metropolitan Black Chamber of Commerce President Devoyd Jennings; a Fort Worth Hispanic Chamber of Commerce representative; attorney Dee Kelly Jr.; and Michael Morris, transportation director for the council of governments.

Group members will meet periodically to discuss strategy for TEX Rail, as well as other projects, including the prospects for rail service to Alliance.

They will offer advice as needed and, if necessary, play a hands-on role in any negotiations with railroads, federal officials or others who can help the T get approval and funding to start work on the rail line.

Ruddell believes that the TEX Rail project will be built faster now that city officials are playing a more prominent role.

"Here's what it does show: We've got support for doing this TEX Rail project," he said. "They told me the purpose of this is to overcome obstacles. That's part of what the feds look for: Does the community support this?"

He is also quick to point out that getting federal money for TEX Rail will not be easy and that any request will have to analyze rail and bus ridership and how highway improvements may figure in.

"You have to do what they call an alternatives analysis, and almost everybody who has undertaken one of these has spent \$1 million and taken one year," he said. "Then, after that, you have to get approval to get into preliminary engineering. To do that, you have to do extensive survey work for not only your own city, but the entire Metroplex."

T board member Jeff Ritter of Richland Hills, who was appointed by Tarrant County commissioners, said the T welcomes the help.

"TEX Rail is not our only job," Ritter said. "We have to maintain a large transportation system in Fort Worth. We co-own the Trinity Railway Express. The bulk of our responsibility as a transit authority is on

maintaining what we have, and that is a full-time job in itself."

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