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Transportation

DART looks at building a toll road, cutting fees for new cities to join

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Dallas Area Rapid Transit’s push to lure more cities into its fold — without upsetting existing members who have loyally paid billions over decades — is rife with competing goals.

The situation is nothing new, but two ideas to strike a balance are. DART board members Friday discussed seeking changes to state law to allow new cities to join for half of what current members pay.

And they also discussed building what would be the agency’s first toll road, meant to help finance a parallel bus rapid transit, or BRT, line from Plano to McKinney.

Gary Thomas, DART board president and executive president, told board members that not all toll roads are profitable.

“But if this was, would the region support it?” he said.

DART already owns the land needed. It’s alongside the unused rail line that runs north from Plano’s Parker Road Station. The agency has long considered the possibility of extending the Red Line light-rail service north, but that could cost more than \$600 million to reach McKinney. A BRT line, which is basically a road used only by high-capacity buses, would cost about \$150 million.

But that cheaper price doesn't solve a key problem: who would pay the upfront costs and how? The cities that would be served — Allen, Fairview and McKinney — aren't DART members.

Thomas said the requirement that members spend 1 cent of their sales tax to join is a deal-breaker for the cities. But even if the Legislature allowed members to join at a half-cent — and the cities took advantage — that would likely put the project at the back of the line of ones that current members want built.

“We still have to take care of the commitment we made to the current cities,” said board member Mark Enoch.

Projects already on the drawing board within the system include a second downtown light-rail track and starting commuter train or BRT service on the Cotton Belt from Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport to Parker Road.

That situation would mean BRT service for new Collin County suburbs wouldn't begin for at least 20 years, a time frame that could be an obstacle to joining the system.

Finding a financing tool to speed up construction, like a parallel toll road, could better persuade some sort of junior membership. But then existing members, especially those who only have bus service but no BRT or trains, would question why they've spent decades paying a full penny.

Addison has been waiting decades for rail service along the Cotton Belt. Last year, the city began exploring leaving DART after the transit agency said it may use the Cotton Belt corridor as a BRT route instead of for commuter rail.

DART Chairman Robert Straus said Friday that other cities that don't have rail service, like the Park Cities and Glenn Heights, could also consider pulling out and just contracting for bus service if new members get BRT or rail without a large investment.

“We've got to protect against that,” he said.

Southern suburbs

DART also has eyes on southern suburbs including Cedar Hill, DeSoto, Duncanville and Lancaster. While the southern ends of the Blue and Red lines get near those suburbs, enticing them to join isn't just a matter of extending rail south, Thomas said. Those cities would like an east-west transit option to connect them to each other, he said.

The same conditions as up north apply. Even partial membership would push construction so far in the future that the cities may not want to join. Speeding up construction could anger longtime, full-fledged members.

Enoch said a barrier to working out solutions is DART's requirement that cities contracting for service must hold an election within four years on joining the agency.

Thomas said nonmember cities used to frequently talk to DART about contracting for some bus or other services until that provision was added in 2013.

"The phone stopped ringing," Thomas said. "They said it's a deal-breaker."

Negotiating options

Some board members want to eliminate that provision from DART policy. They said it would allow DART staffers to better negotiate with nonmember cities.

"What I envision is we design a plan and then go to sell it to them," Straus said.

Other board members said the agency should have enough broad options that the cities and agency could work together to solve the questions of membership and how capital costs for new transit service gets built.

"Shouldn't we go to them with a menu?" asked board member Jim Adams.

The agency didn't take action on altering the policy Friday. It is expected to discuss the matter for months. Enoch said the agency is in a complicated situation.

"It's a chicken or an egg thing," he said.

Thomas, though, said he's committed to finding a solution that will bolster the region's long-term transit options as it expands geographically.

"We've got to do something," he said.

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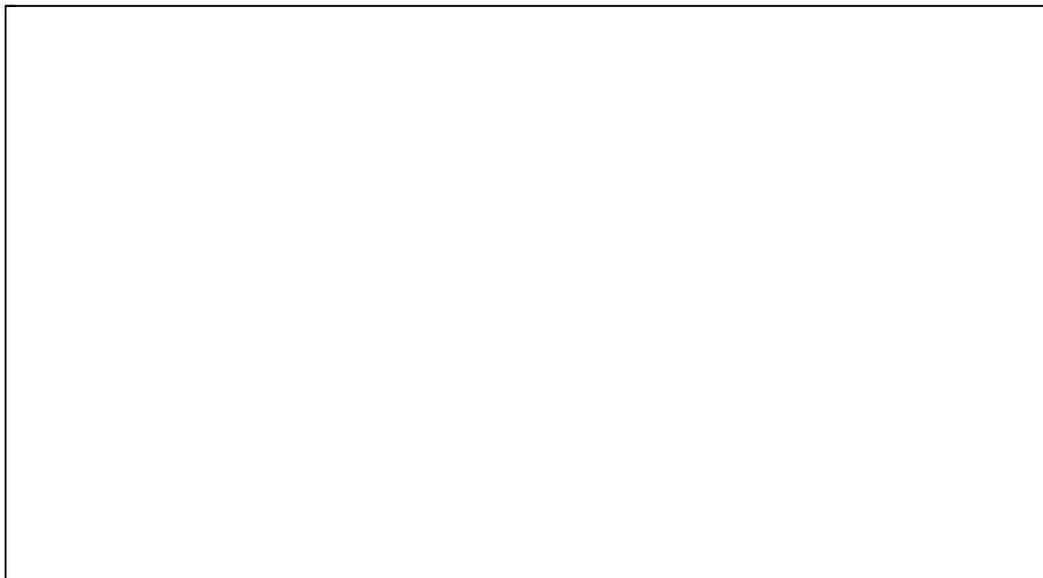
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Greg S

33 minutes ago

DART Needs to concentrate on the membership it has... Public transportation makes much less sense in the far reaching suburbs.

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mustang 66

3 days ago

First priority, second downtown rail line, second finishing out the Knox-Henderson subway station, third a better connection to Love Field.

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5 0



Andy Howe

3 days ago

Does rider revenue fund operations? I am not talking about the purchase of equipment and building of rail, etc. I am talking about just the operations and maintenance of the equipment. It would seem that the tax dollars poured in by member cities would be intended to build out DART. But at some point revenues beyond such tax dollars must fund its operations.

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Bushwood Smithie

3 days ago

Fares pay for roughly 15% of DART's operating costs.

If heard it started -- but have not confirmed -- that fares don't pay for much more than the cost of collecting and managing them.

In terms of farebox recovery ratio, DART is the least financially efficient major, fare-based transit system in the world.

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hockjeyinveins .

3 days ago

DART needs to fulfill existing requirements/promises (such as an east/west rail corridor through the heart of North Dallas) before trying to expand

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7 0



1DaIM

3 days ago

I love Dart, and they have serious financial problems. But adding more cities won't solve their problems. Adding more cities will just increase their liability and service responsibility. And by the time they build out

service to the exurbs, McKinney and Frisco will be built out and declining. Rather, they first need to figure out how to operate with fiscal sustainability within the member cities they have.

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Gene Harrison

3 days ago

The goal of any mass transit system is to move people, clean up the air and reduce traffic. DART is not there to make money. It is a quality of life thing like a police dept, school or public park.

Having said that, I think they did a horrible job at network design. There is no crosstown or express service and the station locations make no sense. Therefore increasing ridership may be a challenge.

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2 2



Bushwood Smithie

3 days ago

I think you misunderstand.

DART's primary purpose is let the regional marketing folks say we have a rail system, and brag about having the longest light rail network in the country.

Users are just a costly-but-necessary inconvenience.

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InsiderTwets

2 days ago

Exactly. See the last lines:

"Thomas, though, said he's committed to finding a solution that will bolster the region's long-term transit options as it expands geographically.

"We've got to do something," he said."

It's like they're trying to fail.

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