



Mesquite steering away from groundbreaking DART pact



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Mesquite is proposing that its next step in transit will be to end a groundbreaking experiment as the first nonservice-area city to contract with DART.

In addition to shuttle service connecting with the Green Line light rail, Mesquite runs an in-house paratransit service. It is proposing to turn both services over to STAR Transit, a historically rural but rapidly expanding agency rooted in Kaufman County.

Changes in federal grant and Dallas Area Rapid Transit policies are pushing Mesquite toward a new path.

The federal grant money that has fueled Mesquite Transit for the Elderly and Disabled for two decades will no longer be available to a city that doesn't offer transit services to its full population.

Mesquite's contract venture with DART started in 2012. The transit agency's board in 2013 crafted a policy for future service that requires an election to join DART in the fourth year of a service agreement.

"Since we were the first one, we didn't really haggle with the cost," said Jerry Dittman, the assistant city manager who has been working as Mayor John Monaco's partner on transit since 2009. "We said we'll pay a premium and see how it goes. Our reward for being a team player was they changed the policy and we can't continue."

Mesquite leaders say the numbers have never added up for full DART membership because of their city's heavy reliance on sales tax revenue. The penny sales tax required for DART membership would cost Mesquite \$15 million of its \$100 million budget, Dittman said. He said property taxes would have to be raised 38 percent to offset that loss without cutting services.

"We're not going to cripple the city to join DART and provide transit," Dittman said.

At the same time, the city enjoys its connectivity to the DART system, and Mesquite seeks to actually increase shuttle trips to the Green Line. DART trains have had available capacity for what has been about 118 riders a day from Mesquite. But DART's tolerance for STAR bringing potentially more riders and including points farther east has not been gauged.

Established in 1988 as a rural transit district, STAR's reach has recently spread, first into Rockwall County, then within the last year to Seagoville and Balch Springs.

The service is available to all ages, regardless of physical condition, and its affordability relies on riders making reservations a day in advance.

"STAR Transit has been a valuable resource," Rockwall County Judge Jerry Hogan said. "The service they provide has been impeccable and they have filled a need of our seniors quite successfully."

The track record as an urban entity is not fully proven, and the heft of taking on Mesquite is an unknown, but Kaufman County leaders say STAR has grown without affecting its service.

Mesquite's plan includes folding its 14-bus inventory and 17 employees into STAR. The city and transit agency promise that information on riders, including regular medical appointments such as dialysis, will transfer with no interruption of service.

Riders and a Mesquite Transit for the Elderly and Disabled driver who attended the first public hearing underlined the special care and low incomes of clientele and sought assurance that the change would be in the provider and not the service.

Trips available to Mesquite residents will increase from 28,000 to more than 40,000 annually as the service reaches beyond the currently defined elderly and disabled clientele.

“Think about a family with one car and kids who can’t get to the doctor because the dad needs the car to work. If you’re under 60 and not disabled, you don’t get service now,” Dittman said. “Those are the ones who need service in our community. There’s more people in that category than those with children with a disability.”

Mesquite will present its plan again at a public hearing May 19. The council is expected to vote on the plan June 2.

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- David Miller**

Funny. This article mention how much STAR costs. But DART changing the rules is dirty pool. I believe Mesquite residents (like myself) need a transit system. But maybe not either of these?

3 hours ago

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Mesquite did well from what I am told by a couple long time residents, in to participating in Dart because they would have paid most in to the system and would have been the last to benefit from it.

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- Gregg Welp**

STAR is okay, only if you can reserve your pickup 24 hours prior and they do not connect to the Dart rail stations or Park-n-Ride stations. So, it is a very limited service option for the residents of Rockwall and Kaufman counties. That is what Mesquite can look forward to for their residents.....

2 hours ago

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To join Dart under the conditions laid out by Dart would cost the city of Mesquite a mere \$9,000 per rider. That makes zero cents for Mesquite to join.

4 hours ago

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