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Dallas Area Rapid Transit rolls out 40-foot-long CNG-powered buses for first time. And: They're safer.

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By Robert Wilonsky
 rwilonsky@dallasnews.com
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Staff writer Haley Thayer reports:

Dallas Area Rapid Transit's new 40-foot-long compressed natural gas-powered buses are on the road. In September DART introduced CNG-powered vehicles into its paratransit fleet, each road, DART hopes their benefits are twofold: They're friendly to the environment and

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Two years ago the DART board voted to spend \$217 million to buy up to 452 of the coaches; last summer the feds kicked in \$12 million to help cover the cost of what was said to be the largest order of CNG buses in the country.

DART hopes to roll out five new buses a week following this morning's debut.

But, says DART spokesman Mark Ball, these news buses aren't just good for the environment: "There are many new amenities that come with the buses," he says. "They are quieter, they have larger windows and low-level boarding," the latter of which allows easier access for people with strollers, wheelchairs or luggage.

And in an effort to make DART rides safer, the buses were built with seven security cameras. Five are located throughout the bus to watch the customers; the other two keep an unblinking eye on the driver.

Along with the cameras, drivers can also surround themselves with a glass barrier if they feel unsafe.

"This protects us from customers throwing coffee or other liquids on us when they complain about the fare," said Ronnie Reed, a bus operator out of East Dallas.

The CNG buses will first roll down a new route called 987, which, according to Ball, has fewer stops and runs every 15 minutes during morning and evening rush hours. But despite the upgrades, the fares remain the same. Which makes longtime DART rider Virginia Morones very happy.

"I depend on the bus 90 percent of the time," she said this morning. "It works for me. I make friends, read the Bible and take naps."

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John Robert · Dallas, Texas

About time!!! The old cranky ones (like the first one that drove by that said "Naaman Forest") have needed to be put out to pasture for *years*. The doors don't always shut right, sometimes one side of the door will open (or close) and not the other. The route displays on the front and side don't always light up, or it will show a different incorrect route, or the display will be kinda scrambled, or nothing at all will display. The driver ends up opening the door to yell out the actual route number so you'll know you're actually getting on the right bus. Some of the steps onto the bus haven't always rearranged themselves for handicapped riders to get on (or some will get stuck and not go back to the regular steps shape for the rest of us to get on). The short bus (the second one that drove by) that was introduced a few months ago, is all right if you're on a lightly-traveled route but they fill up fast if DART has misjudged the amount of riders for a certain trip. Definitely looking forward to the better A/C on the new big buses also. Too bad DART can't feel like putting out more than 5 at a time....

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