



Rowlett officials hope DART light rail's arrival next Monday redefines downtown

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When Dallas Area Rapid Transit next Monday delivers the light rail in which Rowlett has invested three decades, the city hopes the byproducts include mixed-use development and a redefined downtown.

It's far-fetched to expect the first train to bring benefits equal to the \$73.6 million in sales tax the city has paid into the system. But eventually, the residents of the city of 56,000 will measure success as a feeling that they didn't spend years throwing in good money after the bad.

In the easternmost of DART's original 13 member cities, there has always been debate over spending a penny of sales tax on transit. The lakeside community could have used that cash to relieve its high property tax rate, create a quality of life foundation or redevelop downtown on its own.

However, Mark Enoch, Rowlett's former mayor and its longtime DART board representative, says the city should be happy with DART-generated help to finance roads and intersections; on-call bus service, which he describes as revolutionary; and, now, the light-rail extension.

Now, Rowlett becomes a DART destination. At the current end of the Blue Line, the downtown Garland station, 40 percent of license plates in the parking lot belong to out-of-town commuters.

"We anticipate that you're going to have quite a bit of park-and-ride usage at that [Rowlett] station," said Todd Plesko, the transit agency's vice president for planning. "Over time, we think they'll be successful at development."

Rowlett officials spent recent years putting zoning in place to redefine the city's downtown around the station, also extending the city center to State Highway 66 and the Bush Turnpike, whose eastern extension through Rowlett opened last December.

Municipal dollars have always played a major role on Main Street, home to Rowlett's city offices, library and chamber of commerce. Thousands of residents take advantage of celebrations and other events the city sponsors there.

"We have people show up at the community events and say that they are surprised. They didn't know downtown was even there," council member Chris Kilgore said.

Tracks of history

Like next Monday, much of the Rowlett's downtown history is tied to transportation.

As in most rural communities, the downtown was created for its proximity to the train station. Main Street arrived south of the tracks as part of the Bankhead Highway, commissioned in 1916 as the nation's first paved road between Washington, D.C., and San Diego.

After that, new buildings stopped facing the tracks and instead faced Main Street. The oldest buildings have doors facing both sides.

In the ensuing decades, two-lane Main Streets and small downtowns were bypassed. State Highway 66 was built north of the railroad tracks in Rowlett, and today the six-lane thoroughfare is the city's most traveled road — and the home of most of its storefronts.

The city wants to use its newest transportation opportunities to invite those thousands of daily travelers and potential shoppers downtown.

"One challenge we always talk about is crossing the tracks," Mayor Todd Gottel said, noting connector streets being built with the downtown plan. "This station has access from 66 over to Main Street, an easy connection we didn't have before."

But there's no land grab or expectation of an overnight transformation, and existing uses can go on indefinitely, said planning department manager Erin Jones.

"Based on some of the public responses we got, I think there is a misperception that the city was looking to actively purchase property or was actively going to develop the property itself," she said. "On the contrary, we are trying to make sure that this property is ready for private investment when that time comes, so we are putting the zoning in place now."

Though the city is overbuilt in the single-family, \$200,000-home market and planners see a need to diversify, residents are not urban-village dwellers or even warm to apartment living. But Enoch said it's undeniable that the next generation will benefit from the downtown changes.

"People will have the opportunity in Rowlett to not only live on large green lots," he said, "but also to live near a transit station, with walking-distance shopping and entertainment and with the opportunity to enjoy the best metroplex-available entertainment by light rail."

Plano's success

When it comes to area downtowns and transit-oriented development, Plano is the oft-cited success story. Retail and restaurants fell quickly into place when DART rail access was added to preserved buildings and established clientele.

Transit-oriented development like the up-to-five-story urban village look Rowlett seeks is typically a much more drawn-out process, Plesko said.

"You can begin to see some of that happening in other areas," he said. "Along the Green Line, there is development in downtown Carrollton, and we're beginning to see development in Farmers Branch. They had a vision, had done their plan, and nothing had happened until right now."

A residential element took several years to develop at Rowlett's nearest reference point, the downtown Garland station. Over 10 years, Richland College's Garland campus is the only major newcomer north or east of the station.

If there's an advantage to Rowlett's nearly three-decade wait for its trains, it is in learning from others' development efforts. Retail is often a later component, coming only after residents move into the shared buildings. And office use has been the last to fall into place.

Rather than requiring bottom-floor retail as part of its mixed-use zoning, Rowlett is applying form-based code, which focuses on buildings' form rather than their uses. If the market drives retail, the buildings conform to retail. If not, residential is OK.

With some street-level retail space at its Fifth Street Crossing development still to be occupied, Garland has entered Phase II planning as form-based.

While DART officials expect 200 fewer cars in the Garland transit lots once the Rowlett extension opens, Garland leaders are in a wait-and-see mode, believing that much of their nonresident traffic comes from Sachse and Wylie users in the State Highway 78 corridor.

And nobody believes there will be much dent in use of the express bus station near Interstate 30 in South Garland that is convenient to much of Rowlett and to Rockwall County.

Plesko said that daily ridership on the bus route has spiked from 1,100 to 1,600 and that DART is in early negotiations with a transit provider in Hunt County for a link to Rowlett or I-30.

"We think that's a bellwether that suggests the Blue Line in downtown Rowlett will probably do well," he said. "It's not going to be Parker Road [at the end of the Red Line in Plano], but we think it will be a successful route."

BY THE NUMBERS: DART Blue Line extension

10 — Years since downtown Garland was established as the end-of-the-line stop (on Nov. 18, 2002)

19 — Miles total on the Blue Line, including 4.5 on the Rowlett extension

67 — Percentage of Rowlett voters who chose to stay in DART in the city's last withdrawal election, in 1996

750 — Parking spaces available at the downtown Rowlett station

\$73.6 million — Amount DART has collected from Rowlett sales tax since 1983