



Big day for DART as routes are extended to Rowlett, D/FW Airport

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Rail commuters in Dallas have two newly extended routes at their disposal today, in shades of Blue and Orange.

Dallas Area Rapid Transit's easternmost city woke up to train service Monday morning, fulfilling a three-decade wait.

The first Blue Line train arrived at the downtown Rowlett station at 4:20 a.m. The few who boarded for destinations in downtown Dallas at the first outbound train 10 minutes later were outnumbered by transit agency officials, city leaders and members of the media.

"I've been dreaming of this day. That's why I got here so early," said Dennis Bishop of Rowlett.

A former passenger at the previous end of the Blue Line, downtown Garland, Bishop calculated that it was a half mile from his home to the station and another seven-tenths of a mile to his ultimate daily destination, the Dallas Museum of Art.

"I read books, about 15 the past year and a half. I've got a new one for today," he said.

Rowlett had invested \$73.6 million in sales tax revenue into the DART system since joining as a charter member in 1983.

"We have train service now," City Manager Lynda Humble said as the first train left the station, marking the transition from two weeks of test trains, Friday's ribbon cutting for dignitaries and Saturday's celebration which drew thousands downtown for preview service.

Also opening Monday were two new stations on the Orange Line: one at North Lake College and another on Belt Line Road in Irving.

The newly extended route also includes direct bus service to D/FW International Airport's Terminal A, the first DART connection to the airport.

Jim Lay, who flew in from Baltimore for a conference in downtown Dallas, found the Orange Line extension a welcome alternative to the \$65 cab fare or multistep transfer he used on previous visits.

This morning he bought a \$5 day pass and hopped on the 500 bus from his terminal. A few minutes later he was at Belt Line Station, waiting for the train.

"This is an experiment for me," he said.

Gary Dudek, a catering employee at the airport, was trying out the new rail line on his day off.

"I've been anticipating this for a month and a half, two months," he said.

His previous commute took at least 2 ½ hours each way: a bus, then another to one of D/FW's remote lots, then a shuttle, then another shuttle. Even worse, the busses sometimes stop running before the end of his night shift, forcing him to walk miles to get home.

As he waited at Belt Line Station for the bus to take him to the airport, less than an hour after he left home, Dudek hoped for simpler times ahead.

"Hopefully I don't have to walk nine miles home anymore," he said.

In Rowlett, Gary Thomas, DART president and executive director, said the success of the new service would be judged short-term by people being able to get where they needed to go. Longer-term, he looked at development opportunities along Main Street, State Highway 66 and the Bush Turnpike, all close to the station and its 750 parking spaces.

"If you drive to downtown Garland and Rowlett, they're hard to get to," he said. "It is exciting to see these opportunities.

"I think this is going to be a great city for people to come to. Not just an origination point, but a destination as well."

Greg Weiler, who has been taking the bus to commute to his job in downtown Dallas for 21 years, hopes it'll be an immediate benefit to his favorite burger place on Rowlett's Main Street.

Drew Rist rode his bicycle 2-3 minutes to Mockingbird Station and caught the 3:50 a.m. train to Rowlett, where he works on Main Street as the city's creative services producer. He was shooting video with his iPhone to post on the city website.

"It was a lot more relaxing a commute," he said. "I did the math and I'll save a little money. I definitely plan on doing this whenever I can get my work done without a car."

The population of the city along Lake Ray Hubbard has grown fivefold to more than 56,000 during its tenure in DART. The transit agency was initially approved by less than 1,000 voters.

"The vision of the people that said then that 'Yes, this is something we need to be a part of' is remarkable," said Rowlett council member Donna Davis.

As expected, Rowlett's first train also served residents from points east.

John Cothran, network services manager at El Centro College, had been commuting from Rockwall to the train in downtown Garland for about three years.

"When I started down there, I was commuting via car and realized there was a train station. I tried that and it was so much easier" he said. "The traffic coming in from Rockwall starts at the George Bush, about a block from here. I'm going to save a ton of time."

Steve Fisher, also of Rockwall, had been using the station for several years, taking the bus line that has been supplanted by light rail at the end of the 4.5 mile Blue Line extension.

"The bus was more comfortable," he said. "But it didn't run late at night or this early in the morning or every 20 minutes. So this is much more convenient."

