



# Editorial: Converting cities to DART

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The Dallas Area Rapid Transit board crafted a good overall strategy last week to convert prospective new cities from the "interested in transit" category to the "committed to transit" category.

The fixed price of membership, however, runs the risk of discouraging new cities from joining the 13 now in DART's service area.

DART's long-term finances and effectiveness depend on breaking out from the core of cities it has served since the mid-1980s. The hottest population growth has taken place beyond that nucleus, but the agency's boundaries have not kept pace. The main obstacle is the sales tax cap; most nonmember cities are up against it, having devoted their 1-cent increment to economic and community development instead of transit.

The new policy offers a clever way around that. A city that wants to contract for DART service — like Mesquite has, with an express bus route — would face a decision on joining the agency. It would agree to share the cost of a transit plan, then call an election within four years on committing a future penny of sales tax to pay for it. With voter approval, the city would gain quick membership along with years to wean itself off nontransit obligations its penny pays for now. That part is brilliant.

Here's the catch: In 2004, DART adopted a policy allowing cities to contract for commuter rail outside the service area, even if they couldn't come up with a penny, and there were no takers.

Last week's policy reset the commitment back to a penny. There's a political reality involved, with board members insisting that 1-cent membership keeps faith with DART cities that have paid full freight for decades and resented Mesquite's special deal. We get that.

Still, the fastest-growing bedroom exurbs beyond DART's service area may not want a complete bus-and-train package with 1-cent membership. This newspaper hopes the agency hasn't priced itself out of the market, since this metro area would benefit from a seamless regional rail system.

DART board members hit on one other reality in adopting their new policy: the need to more effectively sell the agency's product to outlying cities. We'd like to see that, too, and even prove us wrong about the new stakes for DART service.

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