

DART, DCTA not worried about slight ridership decreases



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Public transportation use fell in North Texas last year even as mass transit rides nationwide hit a record high, a study concluded this week. But Dallas-Fort Worth transportation officials aren't worried that the area is missing out on a national embrace of public transit.

Instead, they say, planned system expansions and current highway construction are likely to push their ridership up. They point to a number of factors — including a December ice storm — as reasons behind their modest dips.

Many of the local decreases came from bus rides, while rail trips actually increased. Despite an overall 4.4 percent ridership decrease from 2012 to 2013, Denton County Transportation Authority saw a dramatic 23 percent increase in the number of train rides it provided. That put it fifth in the nation for increased commuter-rail rides.

"Commuters are seeing the A-Train as a valuable commuting alternative," said agency spokeswoman Kristina Brevard.

That line connects Dallas Area Rapid Transit's Green Line to Denton. Brevard said it is increasingly seen as a substitute for Interstate 35E.

DART saw a slight 1.4 percent uptick in train rides last year while its bus ridership fell 4.4 percent. Bus trips for both agencies drag the overall numbers down dramatically because bus riders outnumber train passengers.

DART spokesman Mark Ball said bus rides decreased largely because routes were cut as new light-rail expansions were opened. He said other regions are posting dramatic gains because they were hit harder by the recession than North Texas.

In previous years, DART saw modest ridership decreases compared with other areas' large losses. That effectively means that Dallas-area agencies have a more shallow hole from which to dig out. Plus, DART expects train rides to increase when the Orange Line reaches Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport later this year.

"The future's pretty bright," Ball said.

Ball and Brevard said the ice storm in December also prompted a loss in rides. DART's light-rail service was completely shut down for days. DCTA canceled bus service. The A-Train ran but had fewer passengers because people didn't use it on the days they couldn't connect to the shuttered DART system.

Ball said that when DART's current expansion plans are completed in 2016, the agency will focus more on improving the existing system. He said that includes finding ways to prevent ice from taking out light-rail service.

"We've got to anticipate things like that," he said.

10.7 billion trips nationally

The American Public Transportation Association's study concluded that Americans in 2013 made more than 10.7 billion trips on public transportation. It was the highest ridership number in 57 years. The figure includes rides on buses, trains, subways and paratransit shuttles for the elderly and disabled.

The association said that from 1995 through 2013, increased use of public transit outpaced population growth and the additional number of miles people drove on roads. Like Ball, association spokesperson Virginia Miller attributed many increases to a rebounded economy.

Miller said tens of thousands of new jobs in Seattle and Salt Lake City helped transit in those areas. She said that nationwide, 60 percent

of transit users are commuting to and from work.

“So it makes sense if we’re in a recession, jobs are lost and you see transit ridership going down,” she said.

‘Long-term trend’

But two generations are also driving the increased usage, Miller said. Millennials are much more open to mass transit and prefer transportation options, even if they don’t use the same method every day.

Baby boomers, meanwhile, are increasingly moving closer to inner urban rings after spending decades in the suburbs. That puts them in closer proximity to mass transit and the places it serves.

“This is not about a one-year blip on the radar,” Miller said. “There’s a long-term trend that’s going on.”

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