



DART lays out new membership rules for cities that begin contract services

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Cities outside Dallas Area Rapid Transit's service area that want to try out the agency on a contracted basis will have to make a preliminary commitment to joining DART as a full member within two years of starting service, according to a new agency policy approved Tuesday.

Interested cities also will have to hold an election within four years on whether to join DART and to start allocating sales tax dollars or other dedicated revenue to the agency. Ultimately, those cities will have to follow the long-standing policy of sending DART the revenue from a 1-cent sales tax.

DART's board settled on the new guidelines after weeks of discussion. Board members went back and forth about how to widen the agency's service area — and eventually expand regional rail — while ensuring that DART's 13 long-paying member cities get fair treatment.

The new policy is poised to get an early test, as DART's board on Tuesday also authorized Executive Director Gary Thomas to begin formal negotiations with Arlington about contracting for a commuter bus service between the city's downtown and the Trinity Railway Express.

"Temporary service should be designed to lead to membership," said board member Jim Adams, who represents Dallas.

For a long time, DART demanded that cities wanting to join obtain voter approval for a 1-cent sales tax to fund public transportation.

But with DART unable to attract new full members over the years, that rule has been loosened. The agency started allowing contracts for commuter rail, although it had no takers. And in 2011, it green-lighted contracts for express bus service.

Mesquite took advantage of the amended policy and started a two-year trial run of express bus service last year. With Arlington now seeking a similar operation, DART board members decided they needed to re-evaluate the agency's policies.

That decision was fueled in large part by board member Mark Enoch, who complained that DART's member cities were being shortchanged. And while some said contract service was necessary to entice new riders, Enoch said the agency's track record should be enough.

"There's not one thing a bus will do that our transit-oriented development and the development on the light-rail system hasn't already done," said Enoch, who represents Garland, Rowlett and Glenn Heights.

DART's new policy expands the agency's ability to contract with nonmember cities on regular bus service and paratransit. But that change proved an afterthought, as board members focused nearly three hours of discussion Tuesday on when cities would have to fully commit to DART and what that commitment might mean.

The board ultimately decided that a city wanting to contract with DART for service would have to make a down payment within two years on long-term plans for a transit system and related finances. Within three years, that plan — and the city's entire share of the plan's cost — would have to be in place.

By the end of four years — the maximum length of such a contract — the city would have to hold an election to add its territory to DART's service area. That would mean asking residents to dedicate sales tax dollars, or some equivalent revenue, to DART.

Since many cities have reached their sales tax cap, DART is looking at special use or sales taxes that cities might currently be applying toward economic development. With voter approval, that revenue would be slowly shifted to DART, as existing obligations are met, until a full 1-cent sales tax is dedicated to the agency.

If any of those deadlines were missed, the service would be terminated.

The new policy could force some quick decisions for Arlington, which wants to launch its commuter bus line later this year. DART is teaming up with the Fort Worth Transportation Authority in negotiations with Arlington to operate the line, but the service would involve DART buses and drivers.

Arlington so far has set aside \$700,000 annually for two years of bus service, but city leaders have avoided making further promises. And while city officials have shown an interest in someday having commuter rail, voters have repeatedly voted down funding public transportation over the years.

Complicating matters is that Arlington can't currently join DART — even if city leaders wanted to — thanks to a quirk in state enabling legislation. But board members said there's still time to sort that out, and board chairman John Danish called the Arlington proposal a "golden opportunity."

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Michael Perry 1 day ago

The City of Arlington has never wanted public transportation be Arlington because of the fear of "undesirables" coming in and out of Arlington. I guess after 29 years Arlington realizes that they have "undesirables" regardless of public transportation. It is now time for Arlington to reimburse DART for 29 years which they chose not to participate.

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1DaIM 1 day ago

Sounds like a fair plan to me. Lets hope it works out. We need a truly regional public transit system, not an exclusive club. Though you can bet Jerry Jones won't be happy about his city joining DART.

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