

DART delivers, gains new fans at Final Four



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One of the most apparent tales of redemption to come out of this weekend's NCAA Final Four didn't play out on the court. Instead, it unfolded on the streets and train tracks that got people to festivities across the region.

Dallas Area Rapid Transit went into the weekend wanting to show that its buses and trains are viable transportation options in what's long been a car-dependent region. It also carried with it a record of bungled service during major sporting events.

Three accidents involving trains caused some hiccups. But there were no major service outages or hordes of stranded passengers like those that previously plagued DART's performance — and reputation. This time around, the agency largely rose to the occasion.

"Since we have no opinion about who should have won the basketball game, we were focused on making sure people got to different venues and different events," quipped Gary Thomas, the agency's longtime president and CEO.

It's been nearly five years since the agency drew heated criticism for leaving hundreds of passengers stuck for hours on the Green Line during the annual football game between the University of Texas and University of Oklahoma.

At that 2009 event, the agency dramatically underestimated how many people would use its trains to get to Fair Park. The onslaught of riders outnumbered capacity on the trains, leaving many on the platform.

"Ever since then, what we've tried to do is disperse people, if possible, among the different stations," Thomas said.

For the March Madness Music Festival in downtown's Reunion Park, DART urged passengers to use particular stations depending on how they came into downtown. Passengers walked from two stations and were shuttled to the park from another two. That prevented a massive influx of people at Union Station near the park.

After the first day of concerts, all train lines and downtown-area stations serving as entry and exit points ran fine. Police officers, DART employees and volunteers were stationed throughout the system to make sure everything went smooth.

DART added 20 trains and 50 buses to its normal service for all the events. The TRE trains it operates with Fort Worth's The T ran on Sunday, a day the trains normally don't run.

Sunday's chilly rain probably helped the agency. The weather kept many away from Bruce Springsteen's hours-long free performance. That prevented an onslaught of people packing trains to get in to the show.

It was weather that hurt DART for the 2011 Super Bowl. Ice shut its entire light-rail system down.

Quick thinking

DART teamed up with the NCAA and other area transit agencies to provide shuttles from CentrePort station to the games at AT&T Stadium since Arlington doesn't have train service. Larry Jones of Plano used the special transit pass for their games. But the shuttle back to CentrePort arrived shortly after a TRE train headed back to Dallas left the station.

Jones said TRE employees greeted passengers and told them they were trying to get a DART bus to take them back to Dallas.

"The TRE reps were very apologetic and showed genuine interest in their customers' comfort," Jones said. "A DART bus arrived within minutes and we were on our way to Dallas — no hour wait for the next train."

Steven and Bonnie Divine of Stamping Ground, Ky., appreciated the trains. They stayed in a hotel near Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport for their trip to cheer on Kentucky. It took them about an hour to figure out how to get from the airport to the train network so they could enjoy the downtown concerts. But the couple chalked that up to the learning curve that comes with visiting a new city.

They said once they got on a bus to CentrePort, all was fine.

“It’s just learning,” Bonnie Divine said.

Airport station

Thomas said DART wants to use busy weekends to show visitors that the region has a respectable mass transit system. The agency will reach a milestone in that goal Aug. 18, when it opens the D/FW Airport Station on its Orange Line. A trip from the airport to downtown will take about 50 minutes.

Dallas will host the U.S. Conference of Mayors and New Cities Summit this summer. Next year, AT&T Stadium will be home to the college football championship game and the 50th annual Academy of Country Music Awards. Dallas is also bidding to host the 2016 Republican National Convention.

As the region continues to increase its profile as a worthwhile destination, DART’s track record and North Texas’ reputation will continue to be intertwined.

“It’s becoming more and more of a destination point for so many different venues,” Thomas said. “It’s fun to see that happening.”

But big events are also a way to sell North Texans on a public transit system they don’t normally use.

“This is an opportunity for them to ride the system and realize this is easy,” Thomas said.

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