

DART scurrying to keep non-member Mesquite in its fold

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By BRANDON FORMBY

Transportation Writer

bformby@dallasnews.com

Published: 01 June 2014 11:08 PM

Updated: 02 June 2014 07:07 AM

Dallas Area Rapid Transit is launching a last-minute effort to keep service in the first non-member city to contract with the agency.

Mesquite this month is poised to ditch North Texas' largest transit provider as the operator of a shuttle service connecting its residents to DART light rail's Green Line. The City Council today is slated to hear about a historically rural transit company's bid to take over the shuttle. The body will vote June 16 on whether to accept STAR Transit's bid.

DART officials say they'll have a rival bid to Mesquite in time for that vote. But it's not yet clear on how competitive the bid will be. STAR has said it can provide the service – and even add midday shuttles – for \$297,000. That compares to the \$316,000 DART's service cost last year. And that contract didn't include midday shuttles.

"We're still working out the numbers," said Todd Plesko, DART's planning and development vice president.

Yet helping Mesquite save money isn't the only hurdle DART has to overcome. The agency also has to convince city officials that sticking with DART for three more years won't force it to join the agency or delay the inevitability of having to choose another company at some point.

The city's contract with DART started in 2012. It allows Mesquite to provide its residents to DART's expansive light-rail network. And it lets the transit agency add capacity on its Green Line, which runs from Denton County through downtown Dallas to Pleasant Grove.

But one year after the agreement began, DART changed its policy about future service that requires non-member cities to have an election asking residents to join the agency in the fourth year of a service agreement. Mesquite officials say that's not likely to happen because the city heavily relies on the penny sales tax required for DART membership.

Assistant City Manager Jerry Dittman said joining DART would require massive service cuts or raising property taxes to what would likely be the highest rate in North Texas.

"The way the policy is written, we can't continue," Dittman said.

DART officials contend that the clock on that four-year deadline won't start ticking until a new agreement is signed since that policy began after the execution of the current contract. The agency is currently proposing a three-year agreement that wouldn't trigger such an election.

DART board members last week also discussed the possibility of changing its policy on non-member city contracts, though that's not likely to happen before Mesquite votes on the STAR agreement.

Mesquite's contract with DART doesn't expire until the end of the year, but Dittman said the city is moving forward now to prevent a service disruption if providers are switched. Plus, Mesquite is simultaneously considering contracting to have STAR take over its in-house transit service for elderly and disabled residents.

The city needs that agreement in place this month to meet a July 1 application deadline for federal money that would help fund that deal.

"That's a hard date I can't miss," Dittman said.

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