



## Mesquite to continue bus route connecting with DART



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Mesquite extended its groundbreaking deal as the first city outside the Dallas Area Rapid Transit service area to tie into DART, but there are worries for the partnership's long-term future.

The City Council last week approved \$324,000 to support the weekday bus route connecting Mesquite's Hanby Stadium to DART rail's Green Line.

City officials said service will continue at least through September 2014.

Any longer-term forecast is contingent on how DART deals with cities that do not pay a penny sales tax. Supporters in Mesquite fear current policy could tie new agreements to a full-service plan and a transit election. So they were happy to extend the city's spring 2012 deal.

"We want to continue it for next year so that if DART doesn't change the policies ... we now have another option so that the service wouldn't be interrupted," Mayor John Monaco said in the council debate.

The bus line averages 120 to 140 boardings a day and has about 60 core riders, Assistant City Manager Jerry Dittman said.

"The service is growing," Monaco said.

DART officials say their recent agreement with Arlington, also outside the service area, has no bearing on Mesquite. A two-year contract for weekday service in Arlington starts in August. The city, the University of Texas at Arlington and the city's business community will share the \$700,000 cost.

"We've been working with Mesquite to allow them to go one more year," said Todd Plesko, DART vice president of planning and development. "We're not discussing and we haven't discussed going beyond one more year. We're hoping to be able to have that conversation."

Changes to federal law have created a tie-in between the commuter line partnership with DART and Mesquite's in-house paratransit service, Dittman said. Mesquite Transportation for the Elderly and Disabled logs 40,000 annual trips. Mesquite funds that operation with help from \$392,000 in state and federal grants.

"We're hearing that state money likely will still come. But federal won't be coming unless we do one other thing," Dittman told the council. "We're being told that to be guaranteed operational funding, you have to operate a commuter or fixed route service in your town.

"What the feds are trying to say is that if you want paratransit money for a very small population, you must also serve the larger population somehow."

The city's annual Quality of Life Corp. budget, including the DART funding, was approved by 5-2 council vote.

Grant programs will refund about half of Mesquite's commitment. Transportation is among few available uses for the Quality of Life Corp. 4B funds, which come from an extra sales tax approved by voters. That tax is also part of the reason Mesquite does not have a penny to give to full DART membership.

Three decades ago, Mesquite voters made the decision not to join DART. Council member Dennis Tarpley says residents are opposed to the connecting service as well.

Tarpley voted against the funding, saying it was a large amount of tax money for a small amount of users. He said the money could be better spent in areas such as street improvements. Council member Greg Noschese also voted against the budget.

Dittman promised the council an update on evolving grant policy sometime this summer.

Did you see something wrong in this story, or something missing? Let us know.