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## STAR Transit out to prove itself in Dallas County



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As STAR Transit ramps up toward becoming Dallas County's second-largest provider of public transportation, it also campaigns to establish a local identity.

Education about the service is key in Balch Springs, where only 215 trips were logged in nearly three months after a May 1 rollout.

There's more of a skeptical eye among riders in Mesquite, where on Oct. 1, STAR replaces the locally acclaimed Mesquite Transportation for the Elderly & Disabled (MTED).

With more than 28,000 trips per year, Mesquite's traditional riders know and rely on public transportation. But they transition to STAR with high expectations for bus service.

Officials from Kaufman and Rockwall counties vouch for STAR. A contract renewal for indigent patients breezed through the Rockwall Commissioners Court last month with County Judge Jerry Hogan's full endorsement.

"They will pick you up, they will deliver you, they will come back and get you and bring you home at a very nominal fee," he said.

But can STAR maintain its level of service through rapid expansion?

"Mesquite represents a new challenge to us because in other areas we've gone to, before those areas never had public transit," said David Mojica Jr., STAR comptroller. "It is not that MTED is going away, but that we're taking the service and giving the STAR Transit touch to it."

That includes incorporating the city's fleet and its drivers — and striving to keep customers and routes with those drivers.

It meant case-by-case reassurance from Omega Hawkins, STAR's executive director, when patrons happy with Mesquite's 20-year service showed their concerns at public hearings.

"That's what separates Omega," Mojica said. "She is concerned about all of our passengers and all our future passengers on an individual basis. And that concern filters throughout the agency as a whole."

Hawkins and STAR trace their roots to 1980, when Kaufman County seniors needed to get to the county's senior center for meals. Kaufman Area Rural Transit was formed in 1988, services expanded to Rockwall County in 2005 and the name was changed to STAR Transit in 2011.

As a public transit agency, STAR receives funding from grants, some administered from the state and some from the North Central Texas Council of Governments. It also contracts with the entities it serves and collects fares. Customers get a price break by reserving service a day in advance.

Dallas County inroads were made last year in Seagoville, where close to 4,000 rides have now been logged.

Mesquite was forced to change its approach because of change in federal law. The grants it used to run in-house transit for its need-

dependent population were to cease unless it also provided transit for the general population. The city's connection with STAR retains that funding source, a large chunk of the projected \$620,000 annual budget for service to the city.

The deal also eliminates the MTED waiting list as the city's service is increased to 40,000 trips per year. Should negotiations with Dallas Area Rapid Transit pan out, starting next year, STAR could pick up another 30,000 trips by taking over the shuttle between Mesquite's Hanby Stadium and the Green Line light rail.

Currently, riders in Balch Springs and Seagoville need medical reasons to use STAR to venture to other Dallas County cities. But there are no restrictions on transit within the service area.

Once Mesquite is in the service area, Town East Mall and other retail and employment destinations become available to riders in those cities and the member counties beyond.

New Balch Springs City Manager Suzi Cluze believes word of mouth will also sell the new service.

"Mobility is freedom. It's your independence," she said in introducing STAR at a Town Hall meeting Tuesday. "Tell everybody about it."

**IF YOU GO**

STAR Transit public presentations

**Monday:** Mesquite City Council pre-meeting, 757 N. Galloway Ave., 12:30 p.m

**Aug. 9:** Mesquite back-to-school event, City Lake Park, 200 Parkview Lane, 10 a.m. to noon.

**Aug. 14:** Terrell ISD Back 2 School Fair, Furlough Middle School, 700 N. Catherine St., 5-8 p.m.

**Sept. 3:** Evans Senior Center, 1116 Hillcrest St., Mesquite, 10 a.m.

**Sept. 10:** Goodbar Senior Center, 3000 Concord St., Mesquite, 9 a.m.

**Sept. 17:** Rutherford Senior Center, 900 Rutherford Drive, Mesquite, 11 a.m.

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