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## **A-Train opening doors for riders from Denton and Highland Village to Lewisville and Dallas**

Hickory Creek resident Doris Dobson says it's the convenience and cost savings that bring her back to riding the train from southern Denton County to downtown Dallas every day.

It was a little more than two years ago that locals were introduced to the A-train. Ridership is growing and city officials say it's having a positive impact on local communities.

The 21-mile commuter rail line that connects Denton, Highland Village, Lewisville and Dallas, via Carrollton, saw 39,855 passengers in July, an increase of 37 percent compared with July 2012.

"I think it's working great," Dobson said. "It's very convenient."

Transportation officials are optimistic about the continued progress of the commuter line.

"In the next couple of weeks, we're hitting our millionth rider on the A-train. A lot of good things are happening," said Jim Cline, president of the Denton County Transportation Authority, which oversees the commuter rail operation.

They're on track to exceed last year's ridership numbers. The train carried 387,478 passengers last year, and with three months still out before the fiscal year is over, it has already carried 379,590 passengers as of late August.

Daily average ridership is up by about 300 to 400 passengers this year compared with 2012. The start of the new school year for university students is also having an impact: Daily average ridership since Aug. 26 has been 2,250, a jump from 1,800 from Aug. 1 to 25.

"People have also gotten to know us and see us and rely on us," Cline said.

It's no surprise that the train is also having an economic impact on the towns it crosses.

Lewisville residents taking the train from the Hebron station might have already noticed considerable development, including additional housing projects, around the park-and-ride station.

But Nika Reinecke, Lewisville's planning and economic development director, said it's bigger than that — the rail system has influenced city planning.

“The DCTA rail stations in Lewisville are truly a game-changer for development in the city,” she said.

Two major projects — the single-family housing development in Old Town called The Main Street Village and the Hebron 121 project — were built in anticipation of the stations even before rail construction wrapped up.

Continuous service changes are also trying to accommodate passengers such as Lewisville resident Austin Martin, who said he’d like the train to run more often.

Martin, a graduate student at Southern Methodist University, drives to school because he said the train schedule just isn’t flexible enough. But he said it’s a nice alternative to driving when he has time.

Last year, demand pushed the DCTA to add day service to the A-train. The most recent changes in late August eliminated the last Friday- and Saturday-night trains because people just weren’t riding that late.

“We did a lot to try to make that work. We’d have some trains with just a couple of people on them,” Cline said about the late-night trains.

Instead, officials saw a need for earlier Saturday trains.

“We’re finding that our Saturday ridership is up, so we’re starting earlier on Saturdays. It means you can get to the zoo, to different places earlier now,” Cline said.

Like any transportation system, the A-train is a work in progress. The DCTA is already looking ahead to January when it will likely implement additional changes, which could make the train easier to ride for some folks.

“We’ve certainly heard a lot of positive feedback from the communities,” Cline said. “Usually people say they want more service, not that they want us to go away.”

That could be particularly important as construction on the Interstate 35E expansion is set to begin in October.

“We’ll provide an alternative while there’s so much congestion there, and there already is,” Cline said.

Highland Village Mayor Patrick Davis also hopes his residents will take advantage of the system while I-35E construction gets underway.

“As gas prices continue to increase, the population in Denton County continues to grow and the pending construction of I-35E, the A-train provides a network of transportation choices that allow residents of Highland Village and our county to move more easily in and throughout the region,” he said.

As the train continues to gain traction with locals, Reinecke said the rail system will increasingly become a marketing tool for the city and a way to attract businesses to Lewisville.

The construction of additional housing near the Old Town and Hebron stations, along with commercial developments like offices, hotel and retail planned in future phases, is evidence of that.

And it’s meeting the needs of locals such as Dobson, who want the convenience of living close to a train station. She said she’s ready to move closer to the Hebron station at an adjacent apartment complex.

“I will definitely keep riding,” she said.