

DART likely to extend controversial paratransit contract



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Dallas Area Rapid Transit board members are poised Tuesday to overhaul and extend a \$185.9 million contract with the controversial company that provides transportation for elderly and disabled passengers.

The move comes as MV Transportation is putting itself up for sale and after the transit agency has spent months weathering criticisms about the vendor's performance.

A majority of DART's 14 board members voiced support for the contract changes earlier this month. But some board members say the alterations are so vast they should solicit other companies' bids rather than negotiate exclusively with MV.

That minority is joined by a chorus of people who say DART isn't holding MV accountable for poor performance -- or its own flawed bid. Some passengers and drivers are so unhappy with MV that they hold out last-minute hopes that the board will seize this as a chance to switch operators.

Meanwhile, DART staffers repeatedly tell board members that there's not time to pick a new company before MV's two-year pilot period ends in September. They allude to legal repercussions and possible operational problems if MV does not continue as the paratransit provider.

"We need to keep the pressure on and move forward," board member Gary Slagel, who supports extending the contract, said during a meeting this month.

But others aren't convinced there is catastrophe waiting in the wings if other companies are allowed to bid. Board member Richard Carrizales this month accused staffers of using scare tactics to garner support for the changes.

The board is expected to discuss the matter at a committee meeting Tuesday afternoon. Members are then scheduled to vote on the contract changes at their regular 6:30 p.m. meeting.

Board member Jerry Christian earlier this month expressed concern at extending the contract when the agency has fined MV \$335,000 for missing performance standards.

"If they didn't meet it, I can't see why we would be rewarding them," he said. "We need to reconsider this."

Riders' complaints

Until 2012, DART paid Veolia Transportation to operate a fleet of paratransit vehicles the agency owned. In a bid to save tens of millions of dollars, DART then adopted a new system that uses a mixed fleet of vehicles. The new method relies heavily on taxi cabs as well as vehicles owned by the vendor.

Veolia and MV were among the companies that submitted bids. MV won. Its takeover of paratransit was a disaster. Passengers complained about poorly trained drivers, out-of-the-way routes and long wait times.

Other criticisms

Many of the criticisms echoed public complaints government entities across the country faced after they hired MV for paratransit and bus services. MV declined to comment for this article, citing the ongoing contract negotiations with DART.

The contract restructuring is meant to cover MV's costs of making operational changes aimed to assuaging riders' complaints. DART

would still save money overall, but changes would likely eat up about \$26.3 million in potential savings.

Dick Alexander is the senior vice president for Veolia Transportation. He said the decrease in potential savings under the proposed contract changes is essentially a loss to the public agency.

"That would go to DART and other DART projects," he said of the lost savings. "Under this scenario, that money's going to go straight to MV's pocket."

Alexander said Veolia would love a chance to bid on paratransit services again if DART would open up the process. He said the agency is keeping itself in the dark about what the reworked contract should cost by keeping every company but MV out of the process.

"They're letting them write their own ticket," Alexander said.

Paratransit rider Kenneth Newton feared there would be problems when MV took over. The New York City transplant didn't like the company's operations back home. He experienced similar issues when the company took over for DART. He said there have been some improvements with how dispatch operates -- but not with wait times or drivers.

"Like my parents used to tell me, you get what you pay for," he said.

Kenneth Day is the president for the transit union that represents paratransit drivers. He said few improvements have been made for drivers since MV took over. He said MV got rid of too many drivers in a bid to save money, which now leaves remaining employees with odd schedules and heavy workloads.

"Things have gotten so bad our drivers are not being able to take their vacation time," Day said.

Signs of improvement

Board member Faye Wilkins-Moses last month questioned what happens if MV successfully finds a buyer. DART attorney Scott Carlson said the board would have to approve MV's assignment of an existing contract to a new company.

"It doesn't give me the level of comfort I should have," Wilkins-Moses said.

The longtime board member said the fact that the board wasn't told about the sale during meetings about the requested contract changes makes her question what else they are being left in the dark about.

But other board members said the agency has shown signs of improvement.

That's the biggest factor behind board member Randall Chrisman's support for the overhaul and extension. He said a neighbor uses paratransit and he hears about problems when they arise.

"In the last year, I haven't," he said.

Board member Mark Enoch warned that sending the contract out for a bid after a pilot period could turn companies away from bidding on future DART service contracts.

"I just don't see the advantage," he said.

Board member Pamela Dunlop Gates countered that when she suggested that extending the contract could make companies believe "that how they treat customers is secondary to money saved."

Follow Brandon Formby on Twitter at @brandonformby.

Talking about DART paratransit

In interviews and on *The Dallas Morning News* Facebook page, we asked people about their experiences with DART's paratransit services for the elderly and disabled. Here's what they said:

“Some drivers are on time, courteous and take care to properly secure his wheelchair. Others are rude and apathetic about using proper safety measures.”

Facebook user **Amy Gilchrist**

“You have to flip a switch for wheelchair thing to come up. They wouldn’t even flip the switch. They’d just say, ‘Sorry man, it’s too heavy, it won’t pick you up.’ It was just to shame him.”

Diana Cuellar of Grand Prairie about a client who used the service

“I work at a doctor’s office and we call for the patient to be picked up and often they are sitting in the lobby hours later still waiting in their ride.”

Facebook user **Mary Ball**

“Someone didn’t do their homework.”

Paratransit user **Kenneth Newton**, on DART selecting MV Transportation in 2012

“My brother uses DART paratransit. ... Taxi drivers would pull up and behaved confused and irritated. After complaining often, the bus started picking/dropping him again. All has been well since.”

Facebook user **Jacqueline Villalpando**

“We should pay more taxes to have more vehicles and drivers ready at a moment’s notice. This is a very much needed service.”

Facebook user **Tod Grimes**

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Wylie H Dallas

3 hours ago

Oddly, this article leaves out a key piece of information, the contract with MV Holdings actually involves an intimate partnership with Irving Holdings/Jack Bewley/Yellow Cab, etc.

See: <http://www.marketwired.com/press-release/mv-transportation-inc-awarded-186-million-dallas-paratransit-contract-1612681.htm>

Here is the apparent sequence of events:

- 1) MV Transportation, working with Jack Bewley/Irving Holdings/Yellow Cab, wins this major contract with DART by promising tens of millions of dollars in savings.
- 2) Once Irving Holdings, using Yellow Cab, etc. takes over the contract, service levels plummet, complaints skyrocket, and use declines--- because the service is so terrible.