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## YOUR COMMUTE

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# All aboard? Trinity Railway Express, now 17, experiences a dip in ridership

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BY GORDON DICKSON  
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The one beef Sarah Gonzales has with Trinity Railway Express service is that there simply isn't enough of it.

"They still don't have enough trains to accommodate all the people," said Gonzales, who lives in Fort Worth's Riverside area and otherwise enjoys riding the commuter line each day to a job at CentrePort, the corporate park south of Dallas/Fort Worth Airport. "Any day between about 4:30 and 5:30 [p.m.], it's still too crowded and people are just standing, because they can't ... find a place to sit down."

Her complaint was echoed by one rider after another during a recent afternoon aboard the train from downtown Fort Worth to Dallas. During peak periods, riders want more frequent trains — and more cars to give passengers a little elbow room. During less crowded times, such as midafternoon, they don't want to have to wait two hours on a lonely station platform for the next train.

But while many rush-hour trains are packed to the gills with riders, overall the TRE's popularity is in a bit of a funk these days. Ridership as a whole is down for the fourth consecutive year. Officials at the commuter rail line, which is owned jointly by the Fort Worth Transportation Authority, also called the T, and Dallas Area Rapid Transit, are resorting to some unusual, creative steps to try to get

They're now offering wireless online access in every train car and trying to lure new customers with discounted family-pass tickets to beef up Saturday business. There is even preliminary talk about adding Sunday service, to lure more weekend pleasure riders and to serve more commuters who work odd hours.

All of these efforts point to a certain reality for TRE. The service, which started in December 1996 in Dallas County and was expanded to downtown Fort Worth in December 2001, is no longer a fledgling darling of the region's transportation system. It's a mature commuter line — and one that will have to do more to satisfy its customers and keep them coming back.



View photos

### TRE through the years

Average weekday ridership each year on the Trinity Railway Express, which began service in late 1996:

- 1997: 913 (service began Dec. 30, 1996, Dallas to Irving)
- 1998: 1,785 (midday/evening service added Dec. 15, 1998)
- 1999: 2,169 (Saturday service added, Dec. 5, 1998)
- 2000: 2,456 (Richland Hills Station opens Sept. 16)
- 2001: 4,758

- T&P Station, Dec. 3, 2001)
- 2003: 8,045
- 2004: 7,674
- 2005: 7,643
- 2006: 8,618
- 2007: 8,893
- 2008: 9,796
- 2009: 9,879 (Daily service begins at Victory Station, Sept. 14)
- 2010: 8,680
- 2011: 8,468

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## 'I know more riders are out there'

Although there were weeks in 2008 when TRE ridership spiked to record levels — spurred on by gas prices in the \$4-a-gallon neighborhood — the best overall year in the history of the service was 2009. That year, when the opening of a 10th train stop at Victory Station in Dallas was celebrated, an average of 9,870 riders boarded trains each weekday, DART figures show.

But ridership has steadily declined since — and through August the average weekday ridership is now down to 7,535 people. That's the lowest since 2002, the first full year TRE served downtown Fort Worth.

"When gasoline prices were very, very high, we were around 11,000-a-day ridership, so I know there are some more riders out there," said Tim McKay, DART executive vice president for growth and regional development. Citing estimates from the North Central Texas Council of Governments, McKay added that "we may be capturing half or two-thirds of what they estimate the ridership population to be."

McKay said DART and the T have to do a better job feeding the TRE line with connecting bus service. For example, Arlington's MAX bus service — a two-year experiment that began in August, with buses connecting TRE's CentrePort Station to the University of Texas at Arlington — brings in potentially hundreds of new riders per day who perhaps used to think that the nearest TRE station was too far away.

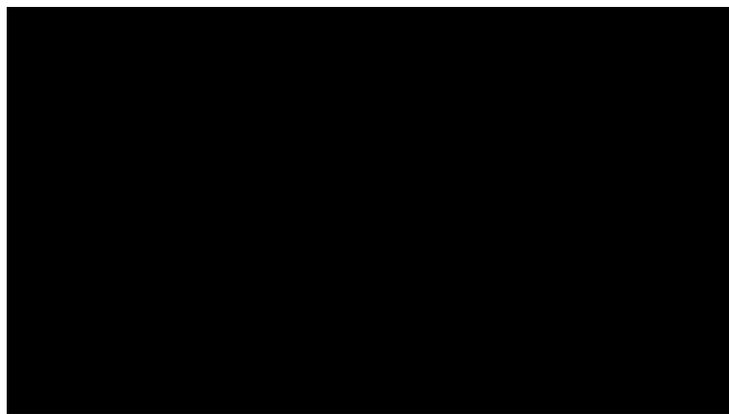
"One of the challenges we generally face is that last mile connection," he said. "You can get people close, but how do you get them to their final destination? As the system grows we have to modify our bus service and feed our ridership."

By itself, the TRE corridor has limited potential to grow much beyond its current bounds, said Peter LeCody, president of Texas Rail Advocates, which pushes for increased passenger rail service in the region.

LeCody agrees that TRE needs better connections with bus and other rail services that can reach out several miles beyond the TRE's tracks to begin growing again.

"There's not a lot of transit-oriented development in that corridor. It's basically an industrial area," he said.

## Better marketing



However, the T's plans to build a TEX Rail line from downtown Fort Worth to Grapevine and DFW Airport's north entrance would open up a whole new part of the region to commuter rail service, likely bringing in throngs of new riders to TRE, officials said. TEX Rail is being aggressively pushed by Fort Worth officials who are seeking a federal grant to open the service by 2017, although federal officials have warned that the competition for a shrinking pot of transit funding is fierce.

LeCody also said the T and DART should do more to market TRE, such as perhaps paint large logos on railroad bridges that cross major highways.

"I brought this to the attention of the TRE execs over five years ago and never got a reply," LeCody said in an email. "The TRE crosses I-35E in Dallas and Texas 360 south of the airport on rather bland railroad overpasses. Beneath them thousands of cars travel every day. Why haven't they used both

2012: 8,077

2013: 7,535 (through Aug. 31. Fiscal year ended Sept. 30)

**Source: Dallas Area Rapid Transit**

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sides of each bridge to advertise TRE service? Many railroads did this in the 'olden' days, when they had passenger service."

Antoinette Kennard of Washington, D.C., agrees about a lack of marketing. On a recent afternoon, she arrived at DFW Airport and took an airport shuttle to CentrePort, where she hopped on TRE to visit relatives in Fort Worth.

The trip went off without a hitch because she is from North Texas and knows her way around. But for travelers arriving at DFW there aren't enough signs to help them understand how to catch the train.

"For a tourist it's not user-friendly," she said.

Sue Askins of Homestead, Fla., was visiting friends in Plano and rode the trains to Fort Worth. When the group arrived in downtown Fort Worth, they rode Molly the Trolley around the downtown area, and later took a taxi to the Stockyards.

But the group, which thoroughly enjoyed the train rides, also noticed a lack of trains during midday, between rush hours. That limited their sightseeing ability.

"The timing is off because we don't get up real early in the morning, and so we didn't get to see the Stampede either time," she said, referring to the Fort Worth Herd that goes through Fort Worth.

But TRE hasn't lost its luster with Sam Arrowood, an engineer who lives in Rowlett, east of Dallas, and commutes 90 minutes each way to work at the federal building in downtown Fort Worth.

"They leave on time. They arrive on time. The train is nice," he said. And he added, "The last car on the train always has a restroom."

Marquell Davis of McKinney, who occasionally rides TRE to Fort Worth to visit family, agrees.

But he said, "They need to build more tracks."

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