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Fort Worth T swears in new board; Price tells them the goal is TEX Rail

By Scott Nishimura
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FORT WORTH -- The Fort Worth Transportation Authority swore in its all-new board Wednesday, and Mayor Betsy Price told the directors the city is at a "critical crossroads" with commuter rail.

"Do we make commuter rail happen, or do we let it go?" she asked during a joint meeting of the board and City Council. Letting it go isn't an option, given the region's fast growth and urgent transportation needs, she said.

Price, as expected, told the T its focus should be on bringing the TEX Rail commuter rail line to Dallas/Fort Worth Airport by 2016, comparing the potential of rail to the role the airport played in North Texas' expansion.

The City Council wants the board to bring in a senior rail executive to lead the T or "supplement the current team," headed by President Dick Ruddell, Price reiterated.

The T must secure track rights from other railroads, move along TEX Rail's application for 50 percent federal funding of the estimated \$960 million cost, help move the region toward a uniform commuter rail vehicle, hire out a performance audit by April this year, engage the public on TEX Rail, and communicate consistently with the city, Price said in her remarks.

The City Council, complaining of delays in the TEX Rail schedule and of the organization's communication with the city, replaced all eight of its appointees to the nine-member board.

Tarrant County Judge Glen Whitley, who has the ninth appointee, named Sylvia Cervantes of Richland Hills, a former member of the city's economic development advisory board. The T serves Richland Hills with bus service, and the county's board appointee typically comes from the city. Cervantes is the board's only woman; council members had caught flack for naming all men.

Fort Worth Councilman Joel Bums said the T's public engagement on TEX Rail should include aggressive "two-way communication" between the T and neighborhoods.

Rob Harmon, the T's chief financial officer, told the new board and City Council that the T continues to make progress toward sealing up right-of-way agreements for TEX Rail.

Gary Cumbie, the outgoing T board chairman, said in an interview that he felt Price was guilty of "hypocrisy, as far as I'm concerned," for calling the T out over progress in the right of way negotiations.

The T staff has led most of the talks, and "the mayor and others know these deals are moving along," he said. "These deals are going to get done, regardless" of the change in the board.

Cumbie also noted that the mayor and Councilman Jungus Jordan took over a particularly sensitive set of negotiations with one railroad last summer. Those negotiations haven't resulted in a deal yet, although the staff and outgoing board members said they're optimistic all of the deals will get done.

"In the world of politics, there's no humility whatsoever," Cumbie said.

Price, during her remarks to the board Wednesday, said the previous board had done a good job.



Star-Telegram/Ron Jenkins

Dick Ruddell, president of the T, left, and Gary Cumbie, then the board chairman, work during a T board meeting last year in Fort Worth.

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"Nobody is blaming anyone," she said in an interview after the joint session. "We're just looking for an increased focus on the project."

Ruddell said he was looking forward to working with the new board.

The new board members, in a meeting Wednesday before the joint session with the City Council, moved toward naming leaders but were inadvertently halted by the rules.

Several board members said they were interested in serving as chairman: Carter Burdette, a Fort Worth attorney, former City Council member, and appointee of West Side Councilman Dennis Shingleton; Scott Mahaffey, a businessman who led a recent major renovation project at Colonial Country Club, and appointee of Mayor Pro Tem W.B. "Zim" Zimmerman; and Nefali Ortiz, a Lockheed Martin engineer, former chairman of the Fort Worth Zoning Commission, and appointee of North Side Councilman Sal Espino.

Immediately after the new board was sworn, longtime private banker and member Jeff King, Jordan's appointee, nominated Burdette to be chair. Developer Ken Newell, an appointee of East Side Councilman Danny Scarth, seconded the motion.

Former Fort Worth Councilman Jeff Davis, Burns' appointee, then said he'd heard from at least three members who were interested in being chair and asked for remarks from them.

After Burdette, Mahaffey and Ortiz spoke, Cervantes asked if the board could move its votes on officers to follow the joint session with the City Council. Ruddell adjourned the board meeting, but was then told by the T's general counsel that there was no item on the joint session agenda addressing officer appointments, and no posted meeting following the joint session. So the new board will have to wait at least 72 hours to post a special meeting.

The T will look to call a meeting as early as Monday, where the members can appoint officers, Ruddell said.

Other new board members are Andre McEwing, former executive director, Southeast Fort Worth Inc., and Council member Kelly Allen Gray's appointee; and Dennis Dunkins, a retired Fort Worth schools administrator and Councilman Frank Moss' appointee.

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