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Nashville to Fort Worth: The T's new leader

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NASHVILLE — The station on one end of the Music City Star, Nashville's commuter rail line, has been hit repeatedly by vandals, and the station on the other end is sparkling, well-kept and filled with bustling passengers.

In either condition, the line has become part of life in Nashville, a city where public transit has not always been a popular notion. The man responsible is Paul Ballard, who takes over as president of the Fort Worth Transportation Authority on Monday. His supporters in Nashville, including the mayor, say he is a transit leader who knows how to secure funding and get projects done. One detractor here called Music City Star a failure.

Ballard's main task in Fort Worth will be getting the proposed TEX Rail commuter line from downtown Fort Worth to Grapevine and Dallas/Fort Worth Airport open by late 2018. He will also be charged with luring new bus riders to the T.



View photos

Comparing Fort Worth and Nashville

- Population: Fort Worth, 741,206; Nashville, 624,496.
- Workers 16 or older: Fort Worth, 332,892; Nashville, 299,021.
- Percentage of workers 16 and older who travel to work by public...

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around town.” Ballard leaves Nashville with room for growth and improvement.

In Lebanon, 32 miles east of Nashville's city center, a railroad crossing near the station has flashing lights but no gate arms. The ticket machine has been ripped from its post.

Regular riders say the machine was vandalized so many times that the Regional Transportation Authority, one of two agencies Ballard heads, stopped fixing it. Passengers pay the train operator a \$5 fare when they climb aboard.

On a recent afternoon, only three people boarded the 3:55 p.m. train to Nashville. The ride into town is mostly smooth, but bumpy and slow in spots. Not all the aging, wooden railroad ties have been replaced since the Music City Star opened in 2006.

The ride improves as the train pulls into downtown Nashville, passing the beautiful Cumberland River and the Tennessee Titans' football stadium, LP Field, at the end of its run. It's now 4:50 p.m., and about 230 people, mostly workers from the city's central business district, are eager to take their seats in the 1963 Pullman passenger cars.

Nashville, 6,376. Sources: U.S. Census, American Community Survey; Fort Worth Transportation Authority; Nashville Metropolitan Transit Authority; North Central Texas Council of Governments; Texas A&M Transportation Institute Urban Mobility Report, 2012

Ballard Biography

Paul J. Ballard, 64, was born in New Hampshire and raised in Lynn, Mass., north of Boston. He is married to a former television news reporter and has two grown sons. Ballard ...

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A sheltered double-deck transfer center a few blocks away, known as Music City Central, offers riders a chance to jump on articulated buses that speed through the busiest parts of town.

Nearly all the riders on the Music City Star are going west in the morning and east in the afternoon.

"My car has a few hundred thousand miles on it," said John Cogar, 53, an information technology worker at an engineering firm downtown. He takes the train every workday and said it "saves a lot of wear and tear on the car, and on me."

Ballard has also led Nashville's Metropolitan Transit Authority for 12 years. He faced enormous challenges getting people to ride commuter rail in Middle Tennessee. But the rail line has survived its first seven years, and Ballard has also attracted new bus riders.

His handling of those professional peaks and valleys may help Fort Worth-area residents understand the type of transit leader they are getting for the T.

Why Nashville?

In Nashville, commuter rail has struggled to gain ridership and was nearly shut down in 2008 for lack of funds. Fort Worth's population is eager to embrace commuter rail and other transportation alternatives.

In North Texas, the problem often is lack of funding. Ballard has operated Nashville's bus and rail services with no sales tax for a dozen years, relying on cities' and counties' general funds.

"I think we've increased ridership significantly on both buses and trains here in Nashville, but even bigger than that, transit has become an important fabric of the community," Ballard said.

"Compared to Nashville, where we don't have dedicated funding, the opportunity for dedicated funding that exists in Fort Worth is a real plus. Quite frankly, that's one reason I'm interested in going there, because Fort Worth does have the financial wherewithal to get some things done."

But the T's half-cent sales tax has limited its ability to create new services beyond the Fort Worth-area buses and the Trinity Railway Express. The T co-owns the TRE with Dallas Area Rapid Transit, an agency that benefits from a 1-cent sales tax and has built a nearly 90-mile light-rail network.

The funding plan for TEX Rail is a good example of where Fort Worth needs help. The T is requesting \$405 million in federal funding and was awarded \$50 million in February, pending congressional appropriation. About half of the \$810 million project would come from a combination of other sources including sales taxes in Fort Worth and Grapevine, and state and federal money.

Therese McMillan, deputy federal transit administrator, said last month that TEX Rail is on course to get a full-funding agreement within a year. But it could be held up by budgetary problems, politics in Washington or engineering or design issues later.

It will be up to Ballard to keep the project moving forward and to seek help from local agencies if federal money lags.

Need new riders

Projects such as TEX Rail are seen as key to getting people outside Loop 820 to use public transit.

Fort Worth residents have access to city bus service, the Trinity Railway Express, Denton County's A-train and connections to DART in Dallas. Yet only about 1.2 percent of Fort Worth's workers over age 16 — roughly 3,995 people — take public transportation to work, according to 2012 data from the U.S. Census American Community Survey.

Ballard can address that shortcoming, his supporters say, by getting commuter rail running and improving bus travel times. Because of the improvements he made in Nashville, the supporters said, transit ridership has nearly doubled since he arrived in 2002.

"People like the bus service. The guy who runs it has done a pretty good job," said Brandon Cooper, an occasional Nashville bus rider originally from Cleveland. Cooper runs a hot dog cart outside downtown Nashville's main transfer center, Music City Central, so he hears about the quality of the buses every day from customers.

"For this city to not have many trains, the buses are pretty good," he said. "We have a lot of bike rentals

made \$213,000 in Nashville.

- Was a railroad conductor in Boston at age 21.

- Had his own consulting firm in Asheville, N.C., before coming to Nashville in 2002. Also ran transit systems, including operations in St. Louis and Birmingham, Ala.

- Oversaw a bus ridership increase to 9.7 million annual trips, up from about 6.4 million during his tenure.

- Was CEO of the Nashville Metropolitan Transit Authority since 2002 and also took over as leader of the Regional Transportation Authority, which governs longer-distance bus and rail connections to Nashville, in 2008.

- Oversaw creation of the Music City Star commuter rail line and two bus rapid-transit lines in the city. The lines use extra-long, modern articulated buses that resembled rail cars on the inside, much like the T uses on Spur.

Sources: Paul Ballard résumé, Nashville Metropolitan Transit Authority, Regional Transportation Authority

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here, and the buses all have bike racks. There's tourists and people like that who ride the buses downtown, where it's free."

The most controversial project Ballard has proposed is a bus rapid transit line called the Amp. It would cut east-west across Nashville, serving busy areas including downtown and the West End near Vanderbilt University.

The Federal Transit Administration has awarded \$27 million for the \$174 million project, but it has opposition from Nashville residents who don't want traffic lanes removed to make room for bus-only lanes. Yard signs with the phrase "Stop Amp" are in front of homes and businesses along the proposed route.

Critic dislikes proposals

In addition to helping start the Music City Star and proposing Amp, Ballard supported a trolley project in the early 2000s that quickly met with opposition and ultimately wasn't pursued.

"Mr. Ballard advanced three proposals that were a poor fit for Nashville," said Malcolm Getz, a Vanderbilt University economics professor who often speaks publicly against the Amp project. He argues that Amp will increase congestion and hurt businesses in and around the West End. Getz also describes the Music City Star commuter rail line as a "financial fiasco" that cost Nashville residents millions of dollars to bail out when it encountered financial problems a few years ago.

"The Music City Star was a failure," he said, adding that even though ridership is now close to 1,500 boardings per day, that's still below original projections. "It should have been anticipated as a failure. Mr. Ballard has never taken responsibility for that."

Ballard acknowledges that it has been a challenge getting large numbers of riders for the Music City Star. But he notes that the commuter rail service was started with a small budget — \$42 million initially. He considers it a success because the service has provided an alternative for commuters and has relieved rush-hour traffic.

Ballard has also been willing to be a regional spokesman for transit projects and to ask cities and counties to pony up their share.

"He believes in the same principles I do, it appears," said Michael Morris, transportation director for the North Central Texas Council of Governments. Morris said he knows Ballard only by reputation but is aware that he became well-known nationally for his activities in the American Public Transportation Association.

"He very much believes in partnerships," Morris said. "The more you study transit the more you realize you can't do it alone. He's not just an advocate for transit, but transit's role in the region."

Job references

Ballard arrives after two years of turmoil at the T. It began in February 2012, when Peter Rogoff, then the federal transit administrator, visited the Metroplex and warned in an interview with the *Star-Telegram* that the TEX Rail project could not move forward until the T secured agreements with the railroads whose tracks it wanted to use. Those railroads include DART, Union Pacific Railroad and Fort Worth & Western Railroad.

The agreements still haven't been signed.

In February 2013, the nine-member board was fired by the Fort Worth City Council and Tarrant County Commissioners Court in an effort to speed up action on TEX Rail. A new board was appointed and directed to focus on the project. The board postponed construction of the southern half of TEX Rail, from downtown to TCU and beyond, to focus on the northern 27 miles to Grapevine and DFW Airport.

Two months later, T President Dick Ruddell announced his retirement, effective in October. A six-month search for a new T leader led to Ballard.

The T board's chairman, Scott Mahaffey, said he learned about Ballard about six months before Ruddell retired.

"The first time I heard of Paul Ballard was the second week on the job," Mahaffey said. "His name was given to me a long time ago by someone who said if we ever had an opening, he was someone to give a call to. Paul's whole career from college on has been in the transportation industry. He understands what it takes to run a train, to run large projects."

Mahaffey didn't identify who vouched for Ballard. But according to Ballard, DART President Gary Thomas strongly encouraged him to seek the T position. Thomas was president of the national transportation association at the time and met regularly with Ballard on a variety of transit issues.

"He encouraged me. He said it would be a terrific opportunity," Ballard said of Thomas. "He told me the timing was perfect."

Thomas said in an email: "I think Paul will do well here and I look forward to working with him in his new role. I've enjoyed getting to know Paul as a fellow transit CEO through the American Public Transportation Association and I'm glad he's in North Texas while we work on some great projects to keep our region

moving.”

Ruddell was T president from 2003 until his retirement. He was credited with helping the T grow from a small-time bus service into a regional player. But Ruddell was hotly criticized for not pursuing TEX Rail more aggressively — and not being more of a passionate, regional voice for transit.

Nashville bus and train riders say the recent attention paid to transit projects in their city has been a breath of fresh air. Rachel Chastain, 30, rides the Music City Star and several buses each week to work.

When she was younger, she says, buses were an afterthought in the community. Now the need for a better transit system is a popular topic.

“I would say our traffic problem is growing,” she said. “We’re definitely very vehicle-dependent, but if you don’t have a vehicle — or even if you do have a vehicle but just don’t want to use it all the time —whether or not you’re in a car shouldn’t matter.”

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