

Arlington launches two-year bus service that could shape region's transit plans

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ARLINGTON — -- When buses begin rolling in Arlington this morning, Varun Mallipaddi's expectations are pretty basic.

He hopes the new bus service known as **MAX, for Metro Arlington Xpress**, offers a clean, convenient alternative way to get around North Texas for those who can't or don't want to drive.

"A lot of students are excited, and waiting to find out how much of a benefit it will be," said Mallipaddi, student government president at the University of Texas at Arlington. The initial route connects the campus to the entertainment district and the Trinity Railway Express' CentrePort Station. "I can't stress enough the importance of it being a success in the first two years."

But as Arlington takes a shot at public transportation — albeit limited — and tries to shed its image as the largest city in the United States without mass transit, it finds itself in the middle of a power play that could determine the future of North Texas bus and rail services for decades.

Arlington could join Dallas Area Rapid Transit, the region's largest transit agency, while some say connecting with the Fort Worth Transportation Authority, or the T, is a more natural fit. Arlington could also form its own transit agency with limited power and cost.

And there also is the idea that Arlington's participation in mass transit on a larger scale could lead to the creation of a single region-wide entity to oversee the area's bus and rail system, something that officials at DART, the T and the Denton County Transportation Authority say they don't want to do even as the territories they operate grow closer together.

"There is a vigorous political challenge for how to arrive at a fair governing process," DART board Chairman John Danish said. "For 10 years it has been discussed in the Legislature."

Fort Worth Councilman Jungus Jordan, who is spearheading his city's regional rail planning efforts, however, said it's in everyone's interest to have a single agency making decisions about how to connect the dozens of cities in four or more counties.

There's also high-speed rail to consider. A private company is pitching the idea of building a high-speed rail line from Houston to Dallas by 2021, and in North Texas there is talk of extending that line to Arlington, Dallas/Fort Worth Airport and Fort Worth.

"I would like a single entity building and maintaining the system within 10 years," Jordan said. "I think this change is going to be determined through a process of osmosis. As we've grown, cooperation has become more and more important, particularly for mobility."

The DART option

The new MAX service has already created the kind of synergy that Jordan dreams about.

MAX is a partnership of the city, the university, Arlington businesses, DART and the T. The city, university and businesses are splitting the estimated \$700,000 annual cost. DART owns the buses, and the T controls the CentrePort Station where they pick up passengers.

Bus stops are located at CentrePort Station south of DFW Airport and at the eastern edge of UT Arlington, near Center Street and East Border Street. There will be 18 daily departures, between 5:35 a.m. and 9:41 p.m. A bus stop is also planned in the entertainment district, near attractions such as Lincoln Square, AT&T Stadium and Rangers Ballpark in Arlington.

About 300 to 600 riders are expected each week, city officials say.

If Arlington officials consider the pilot project successful, what happens next depends on whom you ask.

After two years, DART says, Arlington officials would need to take steps to hold an election asking voters to approve a 1-cent sales tax to pay for permanent admission to the DART system. Arlington officials have said a penny tax would generate about \$50 million a year.

If Arlington failed to take these steps beginning in 2015, DART's bylaws would require the MAX service to end.

"DART does not want to be in the shuttle business in perpetuity," Danish said.

To make it easier for Arlington, and other cities, to join, DART passed a bylaw this year allowing cities to initially join even if they don't have a full 1-cent sales tax available, as long as they commit to bringing their contribution up to 1 cent as taxing authority becomes

available. That would make it possible for Arlington, which currently pays a half-cent sales tax for AT&T Stadium, to dedicate those funds to transit once the stadium bond debt is paid off.

DART also persuaded state lawmakers to pass legislation that would allow cities into its fold from a neighboring county.

Taking a different path

Officials in Fort Worth, meanwhile, say Arlington can take another route.

Among the alternatives would be joining the T, an agency that charges member cities a 1/2-cent sales tax — but provides less thorough transit service than DART. Fort Worth officials have said they would even support giving Arlington a prominent role on the T board if the city becomes a member.

Arlington could also try to strike a deal with DART or the T like Grapevine, which approved a 3/8-cent sales tax to help the T pay to bring a TEX Rail commuter line to its city — a project currently scheduled to begin service in late 2017. Grapevine was able to make that deal without becoming a full T member, and paying the 1/2-cent sales tax.

Or Arlington could pursue another option, perhaps creating its own intracity transit authority, with the limited purpose of getting people to CentrePort.

Arlington officials who have been instrumental in getting the two-year pilot project off the ground say they won't know the proper path until they've had time to observe the bus service.

Each option has pros and cons, Arlington Councilwoman Kathryn Wilemon said.

For example, if Arlington joined the T it would be theoretically possible to begin developing a rail connection for half the cost of joining DART. Options that have been discussed conceptually in the past include building a new rail station on the TRE line near Collins Street, or building a connection to TRE's CentrePort Station, possibly along the Dorothy Spur.

"If you can do it for a half-penny, why pay a whole?" Wilemon said. "But there's so much planning and so much to be done, because it's a regional issue. The DART system is phenomenal and they have put a lot of money in it. But look at these cities that have been paying money all these years and not getting service."

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