

Dallas light rail has its own problems

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=2180#more-2180>

Last week my article was about the success side of DART (Dallas Area Rapid Transit), but this week I want to share the other side the story.

My interest in DART was prompted by a gentleman who did not agree with my opinions about light rail.

One of the reasons that he stated as proof that DART was successful was its high ridership rate, about 80,000 per day, according to him.

However, one source stated that the number of passenger trips per day was actually around 200,000, but that most of these were carried by DART's bus system.

DART is not just a rail system. In fact, light rail is just a part of a comprehensive network of bus, commuter rail and light rail.

And DART does not serve all of the Dallas area, but only those surrounding suburbs that have chosen to be a part of the system.

Besides Dallas, there are 12 suburban cities that are members, all of which have been members since 1983.

No other cities have joined since then, even though there are 26 others that are eligible to join. Those have declined for several reasons; some have rejected membership by the voters, some are unable to join because an additional sales tax would cause them to exceed the maximum allowed by state law, and others have joined other transit systems.

Assuming my friend's estimate of 80,000 riders per day is correct, and assuming that the total is a conservative 2 million, where does that place the percentage of the population that uses light rail? Around 4 percent.

Other reports I found indicated that ridership rose and fell with gas prices, which means that when gas prices were low, riders preferred to drive.

One report in the Dallas Business Journal indicated that "despite \$1 billion in taxpayer spending aimed at reducing traffic congestion, the number of people using DART transit to get to work dropped from 40,000 per day in 1990 to 36,900 per day in 2000" and that while supporters of DART say that rents and property values increase near DART facilities, "Critics of DART argue that these increased rents and revenues are simply a natural result of the government taking money from a wide area and channeling it into concentrated locations, namely train stations."

DART does not collect enough fares to operate and maintain its system, so it relies heavily on a local sales tax to subsidize it.

Three member cities (Carrollton, Farmers Branch and Rowlett) have paid DART hundreds of millions in sales tax revenues and still do not have rail service.

They are served only by bus and paratransit (for the disabled) services. Even though they have been members since 1983, Carrollton and Farmers Branch will finally get rail service by 2010, and Rowlett will get it by 2012 (to be fair, Rowlett voted for bus-only service in 1983 when they joined).

One report stated that crime is a problem, especially where rail service terminates in very high crime areas. It said, "security on and around DART rail stations and major bus stops is so light to non-existent that it is not uncommon to hear of attacks on riders or robberies" and that riders are "often faced with large crowds of young riders from high crime areas, often who do not bother to buy tickets."

That report also indicated that homeless people ride the bus for "warmth and handouts".

DART has not been without financial problems. One report said that "In December 2007, DART revealed it was facing a \$1 billion shortfall in funds earmarked for the Blue Line light rail service to Rowlett, Irving, and DFW Airport. In January 2008, DART announced that it would divert monies from rail lines being built in Dallas. When Dallas officials protested, DART president and executive director Gary Thomas - who had known about the shortfall for at least eight months - announced that the agency would borrow more money instead."

It is not that expensive to use DART. Monthly passes range from \$25 per month for the disabled to \$80 for "premium" riders. This should be very attractive to most commuters, especially in comparison with the cost of operating a car. However, only a very small percentage of the population takes advantage of what is arguably subsidized transportation. It also appears to me that DART would probably not have the ridership that it does without the support of their bus service.

The leaders and planners of Tulsa and our surrounding communities would serve our citizens well by looking at both sides of this issue. There is plenty of evidence that light rail is clearly not the slam-dunk success its proponents say it is.

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This entry was posted on Thursday, June 11th, 2009 and is filed under [Columns](#).