

## As Collin County dips its toe into transit, DART may have new competitor

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**McKINNEY** — When they formed in the 1980s, the idea of Dallas Area Rapid Transit and the Texoma Area Paratransit System competing seemed preposterous.

DART was building a massive transit network that would eventually include the largest light rail system in the country. The Texoma system was a tiny upstart that used vans to move elderly residents between senior centers in the Sherman and Denison area.

But lately, both agencies have sought to serve the same parts of suburban Collin County. And, perhaps surprisingly, the suburbs have been choosing to work with the smaller agency to the north.

In the last five months, the Texoma Area Paratransit System, known as TAPS, has signed deals with Allen, McKinney and Collin County to provide transit services, including on-demand rides and commuter buses that drop off at Plano's northernmost light rail station.

The projects are exciting to some local transportation leaders, who see an emerging player in the region and a growing interest in transit from Collin County governments. But they also raise worries that having two major transit providers in the area could leave residents with a disjointed system overall.

### Fast growth

To be sure, TAPS ridership in Collin County remains small. Daily ridership hasn't yet breached 1,000 trips. But it seems to grow every day.

Over the summer, it won a contract to handle Collin County's paratransit service, which provides on-demand rides and is often used by the elderly and disabled to attend doctors appointments and run errands. It also took over McKinney's intracity fixed bus routes and created a new commuter route to the Plano DART station.

The agency will begin operating a similar commuter line for Allen on Nov. 18. The routes from Allen and McKinney are designed to move low-income workers from inside the DART service area to jobs at hotels, restaurants and retail shops in the suburbs. But the buses run both ways, allowing suburban residents to commute into town for work, too.

And TAPS CEO Brad Underwood said he thinks their comfortable rides and wireless Internet will be attractive to traffic-weary suburban commuters.

"I think there is a lot of opportunity here," Underwood said.

### Beating out DART

It's an opportunity that DART sees, too. The Dallas-area agency has long included Allen and McKinney on its list of possible expansion candidates. But financial concerns and politics have prevented that expansion from happening.

To join DART's service area, a city must commit a one-cent sales tax for every dollar spent within its borders. No city has agreed to do that since 1983, DART's first year.

Recently, the agency has tried contracting with nonmember cities. It signed deals to run commuter bus lines for Mesquite in 2012 and Arlington in 2013.

But after the Arlington contract was signed, DART's board adopted a new policy stating that a nonmember city can only receive contract service for four years. After that, the city must hold a vote to consider joining DART as a full paying member.

That rule was a key factor in Allen choosing to work with TAPS, city officials said.

"The agreement with TAPS kind of afforded the opportunity to enter into a true pilot program," said Eric Ellwanger, assistant to the city manager and leader of the Allen project.

#### **Plano worries**

To Plano, the only DART member in Collin County, that decision was disturbing. Plano city officials say they want connectivity with their neighboring cities. Finding a way to bring them into DART is the best way to make that happen, they said.

At a recent meeting, the Plano City Council urged its representative on the DART board to consider loosening the requirements for bringing new cities in as members. Mayor Harry LaRosiliere said the agency should even consider allowing cities to join at less than the one-cent sales tax rate.

"Let's find a way to bring Frisco, Allen and McKinney on board so that the four major cities in Collin County can have a seamless transportation system," LaRosiliere said.

DART leadership says it hasn't formally discussed that idea. But board members said they are open to working with cities to find a way to make membership work for them. The new policy is a sign of that willingness, they said, and the agency has spoken with several cities about cooperation since the new rules were enacted.

TAPS officials, meanwhile, say they think Collin County's transit needs can be met with the two agencies working together. In the meantime, the small agency will continue to grow.

Said Underwood, the TAPS executive director, "I think there is a lot of opportunity once people start to see the advantages of public transit."

#### **BY THE NUMBERS: TEXOMA AREA PARATRANSIT SYSTEM**

**\$1.4 million**

2009 budget

**\$19.8 million**

2013 budget

**100,000**

2009 ridership

**500,000**

2013 expected ridership

**7,800**

Square miles in service area

**875,000**

Service population

**128**

Fleet size, with orders for 73 more

*Note: Funded solely through grants and contracts, TAPS has no taxation authority.*

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