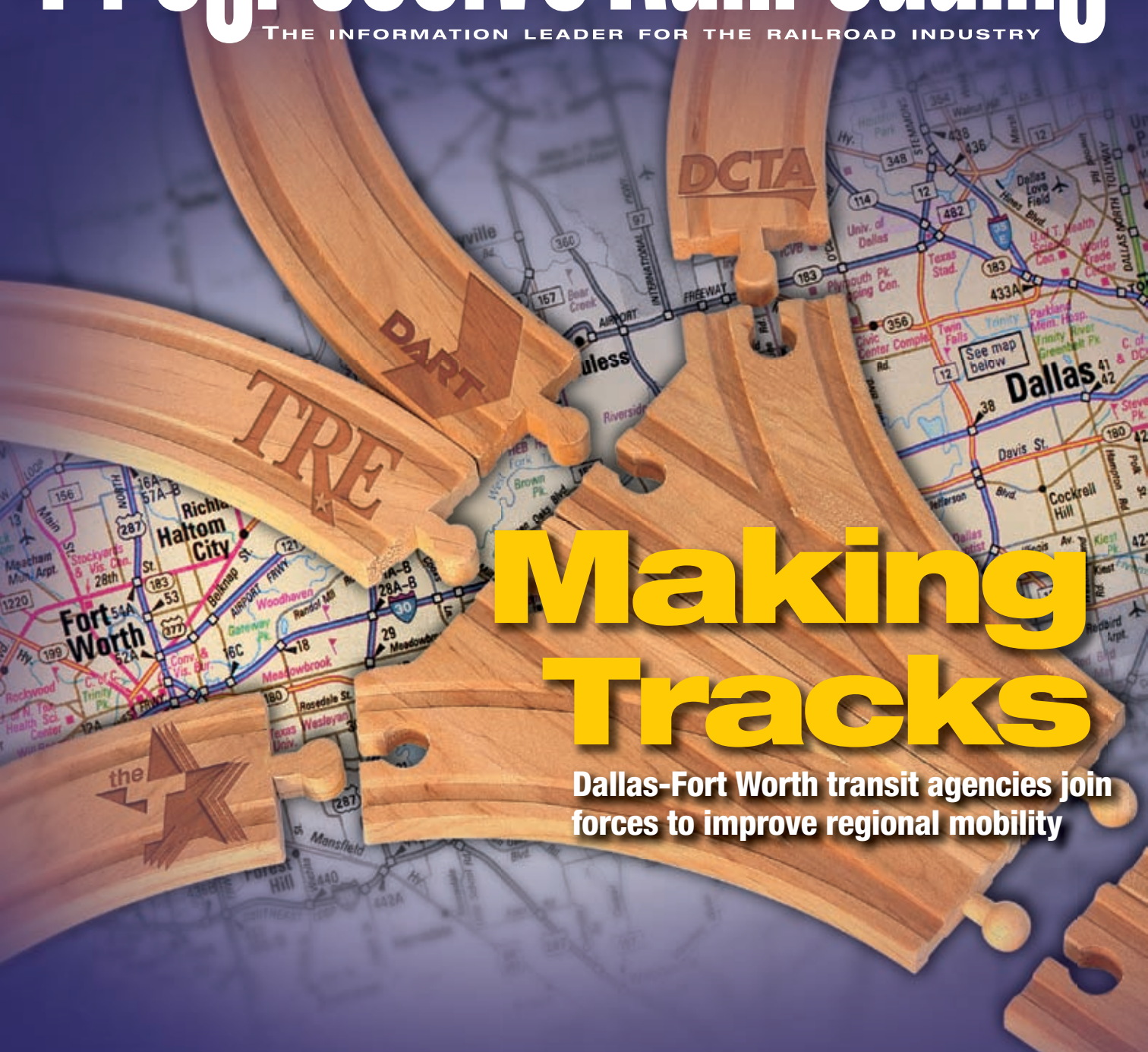


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Making Tracks

Dallas-Fort Worth transit agencies join forces to improve regional mobility

FLEET STATS '08

INSIDE UNION PACIFIC'S MASSIVE BAILEY YARD

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**Dallas-Fort Worth transit agencies
join forces to improve regional mobility**



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BY ANGELA COTEY, ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Dallas highway traffic doesn't seem so bad. Besides the occasional slow down, it's smooth sailing on the freeway from one end of town to the other. Of course, this is at 1 p.m. on a Monday in March. Rush hour, I'm told, is far worse. Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART) Executive Director Gary Thomas says it takes him an hour in the evening to make the 17-mile drive from DART's downtown Dallas headquarters to his home.

Thomas and the more than 6 million other people who live in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex can expect their drive to get even longer. Between 2006 and 2007, the region posted the largest population growth among all U.S. metropolitan areas, gaining 162,250 people, according to recent U.S. Census Bureau statistics.

And the people will keep on coming. With a diverse business base comprising information technology providers such as Texas Instruments, defense equipment manufacturers like Lockheed Martin, oil companies such as Exxon Mobile and airline industry powerhouses like American Airlines, Dallas-Fort Worth is boasting a strong economy at a time when many parts of the country are showing signs of a recession. And with affordable living and room to grow, the region is on track to add another 3 million residents and 2 million jobs by 2030.

Signs of that growth are evident everywhere — in the cranes that stand alongside half-constructed buildings, in the overturned dirt that seems to consume all the vacant land left in the area. In some downtown areas, it seems as though *everything* is under construction.

DART execs say they feel the same way. Of course, a good chunk of the construction is theirs, as the agency is in

the midst of doubling its 45-mile light-rail system. It's a good thing; even with plans for toll roads, freeway expansions and managed highway lanes, the already-congested Dallas-Fort Worth highway system won't be able to handle the influx of residents.

PART OF A BIGGER PLAN

Regional planners realize that and are making transit rail a key component of transportation planning. The North Central Texas Council of Governments' (NCTCOG) metropolitan transportation plan calls for adding 250 miles of passenger-rail lines during the next 30 years — and that doesn't include projects already under way or in the planning stages at DART and other local transit agencies. Factor those in, and more than 400 additional miles of rail are planned for the metroplex — an area that began offering modern-day passenger-rail service in 1996.

"This region is growing by leaps and bounds, so we have to figure out a way to move people around in an efficient manner," says Chad Edwards, principal transportation planner for NCTCOG, which serves as the region's metropolitan planning organization. "We have a very aggressive passenger-rail component to our transportation plan."

How aggressive? DART, the Fort Worth Transportation Authority (The T) and Denton County Transportation Authority (DCTA) are in various stages of adding or expanding transit-rail service. They're also working closely with NCTCOG to help carry out the region's long-term transportation vision.

Seeing it through won't be easy. As ever, finding funds for a multi-billion-dollar program is a challenge. And creating a regional rail system will require a lot of regional coordination and cooperation, a tough thing to do with three agencies — four including Trinity Railway Express, a joint commuter-rail operation between DART and The T — in the loop.

But with DFW-area residents, local leaders and developers waiting for transit-rail service on their side of town, or asking for it to get there sooner, agency execs say they're coming together in the name of regional mobility.

"Everyone wants to have more transit, more choices, it's just, how do we get there?" says DART President and Executive Director Gary Thomas.

And get there on time and on pace with growth. For its part, DART is in the midst of doubling its light-rail system to more than 90 miles by 2013. The agency currently is building the Green Line, a

\$1.8 billion, 28-mile light-rail line running from Carrollton southeast through downtown Dallas to Buckner.


DART is on track to open a 4.5-mile, four-station segment from downtown Dallas to Fair Park in September 2009 to coincide with the State Fair of Texas, which typically draws more than 3 million people during a three-week period. The agency plans to open the remaining 24 miles and 15 stations in December 2010.

KEEPING CLOSE TABS

To keep the project on schedule, DART divided the line into two larger sections: a 10.1-mile Southeast Corridor, which the agency began constructing in August 2006 after obtaining a \$700 million Full Funding Grant Agreement from the Federal Transit Administration, and a 17.6-mile Northwest Corridor that DART began building last summer.

DART officials also adopted a Construction Manager/General Contractor approach, bringing the contractor in early in the design process so it's aware of — and has time to prepare for — any construction issues from the get-go.

"The goal was to try and find a better way to mitigate some of the things that can slow a light-rail project down,"



DART's Green Line will serve Fair Park, the site of the State Fair of Texas, which draws more than 3 million people each September.

Dallas Area Rapid Transit

says Thomas. “By bringing the contractor in sooner, I think we got better constructability reviews, better cost estimates and the contractor was aware of the challenges the design team was dealing with.”

DART also is in the design phase of a 4.5-mile extension of the Blue Line from Garland to Rowlett, which is scheduled to open in December 2012, as well as the 14-mile, seven-station Orange Line, which will run parallel with the Green Line through downtown Dallas to Bachman Station in northwest Dallas, to the Las Colinas Urban Center and Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport. DART expects to open the first 5.1-mile Orange Line segment from Bachman Station to Las Colinas Urban Center in December 2011, a 4.1-mile portion from Las Colinas to Belt Line Road in December 2012, and a 4.8-mile segment from Belt Line Road to DFW Airport in December 2013.

Also on the horizon: building a second light-rail line in downtown Dallas to handle growing service and ridership into the city (projected to open in 2014); and a Blue Line extension to South Dallas (to open in 2018).

“Things are moving incredibly fast,” says Thomas.

While DART moves forward with its aggressive rail expansion plans, DCTA and The T are planning to soon add passenger-rail service in other parts of the metroplex.

MORE PEOPLE, MORE TRANSIT

DCTA is in the final design stage for a \$300 million, 21-mile regional rail line between Denton and Carrollton, just north of Dallas. By 2030, population in Denton County is expected to jump by 154 percent, from 500,000 to almost 1.1 million. And employment will grow even faster, by 171 percent.

So, the authority plans to operate dual-mode rail cars along a former Missouri-Kansas-Texas Railroad line that runs near the Interstate 35E corridor.

The five-station line will serve Lewisville, Highland Village and Denton — the three cities approved a half-

“This region is growing by leaps and bounds, so we have to figure out a way to move these people around.”

— Chad Edwards, NCTCOG

cent sales tax in 2003 to create the authority and fund the rail system — and connect with DART’s Green Line in Carrollton. There, DCTA trains initially will share a platform with DART light-rail trains so passengers can transfer between the two lines.

Once DART completes the Orange Line — and has a second line and more capacity heading into downtown Dallas — DCTA trains will continue running on the DART line into the city.

“The impetus for this was to get a handle on the growth that was occurring and mitigate some of the traffic congestion in our county as the metroplex starts to grow out and to the north,” says DCTA Senior Vice President and Chief Operating Officer Scott Neely.

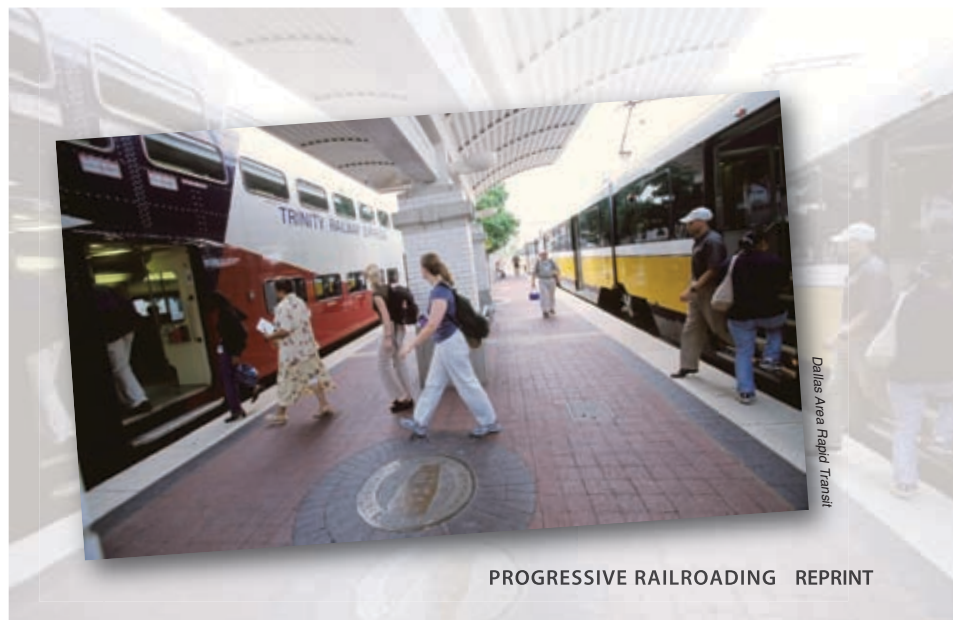
The authority currently is soliciting

bids for self-propelled diesel-multiple units, which would have the capability to operate on DART’s electrified line when the time comes, says Neely.

The project is being funded through the local sales tax, as well as some local funds derived from toll road concessions. Construction is scheduled to begin in January 2009 and will take about two years to complete, says Neely.

ON THE FORT WORTH FRONT...

On Fort Worth’s side of the metroplex, The T is conducting environmental studies for the Southwest-to-Northeast Rail Corridor, a 40-mile commuter-rail line that will run across Tarrant County from Fort Worth’s Granbury Road/South Hulen area through downtown Fort Worth, northeast to



Dallas Area Rapid Transit

“Everyone wants to have more transit, it’s just, how do we get there?”

— Gary Thomas, DART

downtown Grapevine and into the entrance of DFW Airport.

The corridor will connect in downtown Fort Worth with Trinity Railway Express (TRE) commuter-rail service, which is jointly owned and operated by DART and The T.

The line will operate over existing freight-rail tracks, half of which are owned by DART and The T and the other half by BNSF Railway Co., Union Pacific Railroad and the Fort Worth and Western Railroad. Later this month or next, The T expects to submit its environmental work to the FTA for approval, then begin preliminary engineering as part of the federal New Starts process. The agency hasn’t set a construction start date, but expects to begin operations in 2012 or 2013, says Dick Ruddell, The T’s president and executive director.

“Fort Worth is one of the fastest-growing cities in the country, and a lot of growth is occurring on the western side of the metroplex,” says Ruddell. “I think everyone realizes you need more than highways, and we can build this one corridor with the resources we have.”

20-YEAR OUTLOOK

Beyond the near-term plans, the agencies and NCTCOG have outlined proposals for dozens of line extensions and new corridors.

DART’s 2030 plan recommends adding service to the Cotton Belt Corridor, a 26-mile east/west rail line connecting to DFW Airport that DART purchased in 1990 in anticipation of future service; building a 4.3-mile light-rail line serving the Baylor Hospital/Fair Park areas of Dallas, as well as the northern part of southeast Dallas; extending the Blue Line 2.9 miles from the University of North Texas Campus east to Bonnie View; constructing a six-mile light-rail line from downtown Dallas to the Loop 12 area; extending the Red Line 4.3-miles; and building a rail connection to Love Field Airport.

The agency is considering options for several other corridors, as well. One, which DART terms the “BNSF Corridor,” runs from TRE’s South Irving Station to DART’s future downtown Carrollton Station and continues north to Frisco, where population has grown from less than 50,000 in 1998 to 100,000 today. The city is forecast to reach build-out of 280,000 people by 2025. DART owns the corridor from south Irving to Carrollton, but would have to purchase or negotiate trackage rights with BNSF for the segment to Frisco.

At DCTA, officials are set to begin an internal planning process to identify future rail service, including a corridor on the west side of the county running along I-35W that could connect with The T’s future commuter-rail service.

And The T is looking at adding service along an east/west corridor from Fort Worth to Arlington to Dallas, as well as adding service south to Johnson County.

The agencies’ future plans are part of NCTCOG’s 250-mile rail program. NCTCOG can best be described as the plan’s “facilitator,” serving as an impartial party seeking to improve regional mobility, says NCTCOG’s Edwards. But facilitating goes well beyond mapping out future rail programs.

“The effort now is trying to find a way to pay for it,” says Edwards.

NCTCOG estimates it’ll cost \$4.7 billion — \$8.5 billion when adjusted for inflation over an estimated 21-year period — to build all 250 miles included in its plan, says Edwards.

The DFW-area cities that already have or soon will have rail service contribute a portion of their sales tax to their respective transit agency for transit services, but many of the future rail lines are intended to reach areas that don’t currently have service. The good news: Many of those cities are willing to implement a sales tax in order to obtain transit service. The bad news: State law restricts them from doing so.

IN NEED OF A LIFT

In Texas, the sales tax is capped at 8.25 percent — the state gets 6.25 percent, the city receives 1 percent and the remaining 1 percent can be used for other services, such as transit, roads or parks.

For the most part, cities outside of a current transit service area already have their sales tax dedicated to something else; when the cap was implemented years ago, many of the outlying suburbs didn’t yet have a need for transit service. So, for the past several years, NCTCOG and the local transit agencies have been lobbying the state legislature to lift the cap.

After unsuccessful efforts during the 2005 and 2007 legislatures (in Texas, the legislature meets every other year), NCTCOG policy board the Regional Transportation Council (RTC) has gone back to the drawing board and launched the Rail North Texas initiative to take the place of the Regional Rail Corridor Study (aka, the 250-mile rail plan) and accompanying Regional Transit Initiative (the effort to fund that plan).

Under Rail North Texas, an RTC subcommittee comprising 20 local elected officials and officials from each of the three transit agencies have been meeting every two weeks since December to prepare funding options to present to the 2009 legislature. Those options include lifting the sales tax cap, or implementing a general sales, gasoline sales, vehicle emission or vehicle mileage tax, says NCTCOG Transportation Planner Amanda Wilson.

“Policy makers can look at different rates for the funding options to see what best covers the cost and is the most politically feasible,” she says.

The council also is evaluating funding options that wouldn’t need legislative approval, such as a county-wide property tax, says Edwards.

“We’re getting a lot of good discussions on the property tax. Some cities are very interested and others would

“We want a seamless regional rail network here in north Texas.”

— Scott Neely, DCTA

like more time to evaluate its impacts,” he says. “With so many options on the table, it’s taking some time to work through them.”

But NCTCOG, agency and local elected officials will have the options sorted out and ready to be presented come 2009. It could be their last chance.

“If we can’t find a funding source for these corridors, we have to seriously look at removing them from the plan, and that’s what we’re in jeopardy of doing in the next plan cycle,” says Edwards.

DCTA’s Neely, for one, is optimistic.

“There’s too much at risk for it not to go through,” he says.

THE FREIGHT FACTOR

Project funding isn’t the only bump in the road. Many of the proposed corridors would operate over existing freight-rail tracks.

Although some of the lines are publicly owned, transit agencies would need to negotiate trackage rights with BNSF, UP, Fort Worth and Western or Kansas City Southern on other corridors — something that’s becoming harder to do because of freight roads’ tight capacity.

Building a parallel track might be an option in some cases, but would significantly increase project costs.

Meanwhile, the agencies already are hearing from some residents who live near proposed future corridors that are less than excited about having trains in their backyard.

“There’s a lot out there in terms of corridors and potential, but we don’t know how that all may eventually turn out or who’s going to be responsible for it,” says DART Vice President of Commuter Rail & Railroad Management Wayne Friesner, who helps oversee the TRE commuter-rail service.

Uncertainty about corridor operations brings up another issue: Developing a regional rail plan will require coordination between DART, The T, TRE and DCTA.

In addition to working closely with the NCTCOG to obtain funding, the agencies also must work with each other to coordinate services, fares and vehicle technology, as nearly all of the proposed future rail corridors either would connect or interline with another transit agencies’ service.

But officials at each of the three agencies say they’re up to the challenge.

In 2006, DART, DCTA and The T signed a memorandum of understanding stating they “support expanding meaningful public transit in North Texas through the existing organiza-

tions” and support lifting the sales tax cap to fund future rail plans. The pact also says NCTCOG need not form a fourth transit agency to oversee the region’s rail systems.

“It’s just an assurance to the community that we’re going to work together,” says The T’s Ruddell.

Not that the agencies themselves needed assurance. Two of the three have “officially” been working together for more than a decade. In 1994, DART and The T signed an Interlocal Cooperative Agreement under Texas law to jointly operate TRE service, which was launched in 1996.

The agreement addresses general policies such as fares, procurement processes, contract administration, right-of-way management and budget policies; TRE government and management policies; service, operations and maintenance; and fiscal matters, such as how capital costs are shared between the agencies, how operating costs are divided, and how farebox revenue is collected and distributed.

“I think everybody’s kind of assuming the agreement between DART and The T will be at least a model for what we’re going to do going forward,” says DART’s Friesner. “There obviously has to be communication and cooperation.”

JOINING FORCES

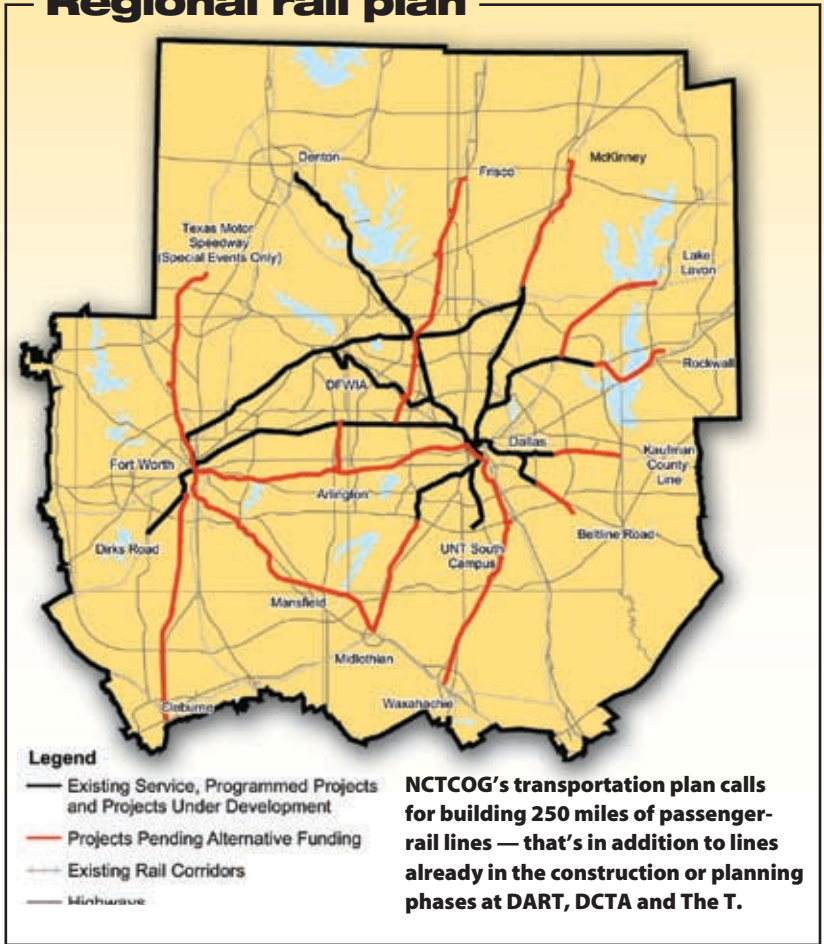
There already is. Execs from the three agencies meet on a regular basis (“Sometimes every day, sometimes every few weeks,” says DCTA’s Neely), both formally and informally, to update each other on project progress.

For example, DART currently is working closely with DCTA on its regional rail system since it will connect with DART’s future Green Line. The connection will require DART to modify one of its downtown platforms to accommodate DCTA’s vehicles. And as DCTA reviews vehicle proposals, DART has a seat at the table because those rail



To meet growing demand, DART is seeking to add a second rail alignment in downtown Dallas.

Regional rail plan



cars someday will operate on DART's downtown rail line.

"We want a seamless regional rail network here in north Texas," says Neely. We need to lure people onto our system and that's the best way to do it."

Also on the to-do list: Create a regional fare system. Again, DART and The T already have a seamless fare structure for TRE service, something agency officials would like to carry over as other rail plans move forward.

"At the end of the day, our passengers don't care if it's us or The T or DCTA; all they're focused on is getting from their origin to destination as simply as possible," says DART's Thomas.

Getting from one place to another simply and seamlessly seems to be the overriding theme. Hopefully, all the pieces will come together — and soon — to make it happen.

"At some point in time, we're going to have to get up at the 30,000-foot level and say, 'What's best for the region?'" says DART's Friesner. "And I think everyone's motivated to do that." **PR**

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