

Rail times draw flak

DCTA plans to start line without night, weekend service

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By Bj Lewis / Staff Writer/ Denton Record Chronicle

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“I want to love you ... right now, not so much,” Denton resident Mary Finley told Denton County Transportation Authority officials, echoing disappointment among several speakers at a public meeting updating residents about the coming A-train.

Finley was third in line to speak during the question-and-answer portion of the public meeting Monday night at the Denton City Council chambers.

PROPOSED FARES

The following are proposed fares for bus and rail services within the county when the Denton County Transportation Authority begins rail service next summer.

Reduced prices are for riders age 65 and older, children ages 5-14, students with a valid high school ID, disabled persons or Medicare cardholders.

Adult one-way	\$3
Reduced one-way	\$1.50
Adult day pass	\$6
Weekly	\$25
Monthly	\$90
Reduced monthly	\$45
Summer youth pass	\$30

SOURCE: Denton County Transportation Authority

The meeting’s purpose was to update residents on proposed changes to services DCTA provides in light of the A-train passenger rail line and other projects coming to the county.

The bulk of response from the crowd of about 70 was from people perturbed by the proposed lack of night and weekend rail service.

Finley, who retired two years ago, said she had a choice of where she wanted to retire and she chose Denton for the A-train.

“I invested my retirement money in a house that is one-third of a mile from the A-train track and less than a mile from the Medpark Station,” she said.

Finley recalled how she wanted to be an active member of the community, help the transportation expansion and be able to see friends and family with ease.

“When I read service was going to be so limited, I was crushed,” she said, “because I invested heavily to stay in Denton.”

Other residents warned DCTA officials that the agency would hinder any future weekend service ridership by not offering it at the beginning.

“I agree if you don’t provide it from the get-go, people aren’t going to have it in their memory banks,” she said.

Finley theorized that local businesses, notably those on Denton’s downtown Square, would love weekend service.

Josh Baish, who owns Rubber Gloves Rehearsal Studios, said he and other music venue owners had looked forward to night and weekend service for the opportunities it could bring to the community and musicians.

“I think not having a weekend or night service is frankly laughable,” said Baish, whose nightclub on Sycamore Street is just south of the future downtown transit station. “It’s completely shortsighted and you don’t realize how important having that would be to the citizens of Denton who are very much looking forward to [it].”

One resident took an informal poll, asking audience members who would ride the train at night and on the weekend. Seemingly, every hand was raised.

Others voiced similar comments and complaints after they sat through presentations from different officials on agency ridership numbers, fare proposals for the bus and train services and a construction update on the A-train, which will connect Denton to Carrollton.

Boris Palchick, senior planner with DCTA, touted the growth in ridership numbers. DCTA officials say they are on track to exceed last year’s milestone of 2 million riders by 15 percent.

Palchick also mentioned ongoing construction of bus shelters and the work being done to link bus schedules to the rail line.

Dee Leggett, DCTA’s vice president of communication and planning, outlined proposed fare costs offering options for bus, train or both, as well as differing costs for local and regional riders.

The proposals include increased fees from those currently assessed, which stirred the ire of some in the audience.

Leggett said those proposed increases are occurring across the region and need to mirror other fare costs to have reciprocal service with Dallas Area Rapid Transit and the Fort Worth Transportation Authority.

DCTA President Jim Cline touched on a more contentious aspect of the A-train — the lack of night and weekend service at the outset — telling those who were gathered that their feedback and comments would go toward further planning, proposals and action taken by the agency.

Cline said he welcomed the comments, good and bad.

Cline mentioned the service plan first published in 2002 and last revised in 2003.

“When we look at our service plan ... it did talk about late evening and weekend service,” he said. “There has been a lot of change. In the last seven years, we have seen a 25 percent increase in construction, rail, vehicle, right of way costs doubling rail operating costs and a drop in sales revenue tax.”

The annual cost of Saturday service would be about \$700,000, and Cline said the agency lost that much in the recent drop in sales tax revenue.

Agency officials said they want to bring service to as many people as possible without losing momentum with fixed-route bus service. They also plan to maintain a lean staff and establish a level of service officials know they can maintain, Cline said.

“We have to make sure our maintenance and operations costs are covered,” he said. “We’re very committed to providing quality service, making sure we do that within the financial constraints.”

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