

Fort Worth bus service falls short for many who depend on it

BY GORDON DICKSON

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Glenn White, right, with Randy Rhodes: "I'm doing this to save money. I'm cheap." S-T/RON JENKINS

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One in an occasional series

Navy veteran Thomas Kellis moved back to Fort Worth a year ago. The 30-year-old west-side resident doesn't own a car, and his anxious search for a new job is hampered by where the bus doesn't go.

Harold Webb, 55, a General Motors retiree, rode the Trinity Railway Express back to Fort Worth after a Dallas Mavericks game. But at 11 p.m., buses had shut down for the day, leaving him stranded downtown.

Ivy Jennings, 60, who rides the bus to work from her home in southeast Fort Worth, has seen bus drivers roar by her bus stop without picking up passengers who don't stand close enough to the stop.

The Fort Worth Transportation Authority, also known as the T, has the complex task of balancing the needs of thousands of riders while being sensitive to a taxpaying public opposed to paying for mass transit. Despite that challenge, T officials say that ridership is increasing and that they're focused on improving the experience for passengers.

But ride the bus enough, and it becomes clear that just about all the people on board have a story like Kellis', Webb's and Jennings' — a tale about how mass transit falls short of their needs.

"I can't get to where the jobs are," said Kellis, who applies only for jobs that he can reach on foot or by bus.

The *Star-Telegram* rode more than 150 miles of bus routes operated by the Fort Worth Transportation Authority, day and night, early and late, to better understand where the buses go and how riders use them.

From all walks of life, the riders offered a pattern of complaints:

Buses don't go where people want to go. Some of the county's biggest employers, such as Lockheed Martin in Fort Worth and General Motors in Arlington, have little or no service.

Buses run too infrequently on many routes and are hard to find in most neighborhoods on weekdays after 7 p.m. and anytime on weekends or holidays. By the end of afternoon rush hour, most of the T's 190 buses are on their way back to the garage or already parked for the night at the agency's east Fort Worth headquarters.

The professionalism of T employees and contract workers is inconsistent. Some bus drivers go out of their way to help people, while others ignore passengers or treat them with contempt, riders said. During one of the bus rides by the *Star-Telegram*, the bus driver pulled over to the side of the road twice to argue with his girlfriend on a cellphone.

Despite growing demand for alternatives to commuting on traffic-choked highways, the T still struggles for the money to maintain services.

During the last six years, the fixed-route bus service has been reduced — some routes simply have less frequent service, while others have been eliminated — even as ridership grew by double digits when gas topped \$3 a gallon.

Those who favor expanding public transportation are still contending with a stigma that bus transportation is for the poor. And the T's service problems reinforce the idea that it's a last resort for commuters.

'Nobody really cares'

Critics say these problems are a byproduct of Tarrant County's history of providing bare-bones public transportation and an unwillingness by community leaders to demand better service.

"Nobody really cares," said Paul Geisel, a former T board chairman and retired University of Texas at Arlington professor. "You can be a real fan of mass transit. I'm one of them. But I realize that unless we change dramatically, people aren't going to ride it."

Former Mayor Kenneth Barr, also a former T chairman, said those in the development community have so little respect for the transportation authority that they want a new streetcar system run by someone else.

"If we can't make it socially acceptable for people to rethink their transportation and ride the bus, then we're not going to be successful," Barr said.

Several T board members said they were unaware of widespread dissatisfaction with the quality of bus service.

White's commuting routine ought to appeal to thousands of others like him. But his neighborhood is served by only one morning and one evening bus, so he must be away from home for 11 hours for his eight-hour job.

On routes such as the one White uses, missing a single bus connection can result in a lost day of productivity.

"About the only thing I don't like is occasionally the bus runs early," he said. "Several times I've gotten to my stop before the scheduled departure time, but the bus is already gone — and I can't get to work."

Rude drivers

It's also not hard to find passengers who have trouble deciphering the system or say drivers leave passengers standing at bus stops and don't like to answer questions.

On the south side, Cynthia Phillips, who moved from New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, lives in an apartment near Crowley and Sycamore School roads. She rides several routes to her job at a day-care center in east Fort Worth and for various other needs.

"I would ask a driver how to get from point A to B, and they would say, 'I ' said Phillips, 50. "That's it. They didn't even try to help. don't know,' Twenty-five percent of them try to help you get there, and the rest just say they don't know."

Ivy Jennings, 60, said sometimes it is hard to get drivers to pick you up, much less talk to you. The T's rules allow drivers to pick up passengers only if they are standing within an arm's length of a stop.

"Some of the drivers will look at them and not even stop," said Jennings, a Stop Six resident who has been riding the T for more than 15 years to her job at a small business along East Lancaster Avenue. "It depends on the driver."

The T began stressing customer friendliness years ago, among its own employees and McDonald Transit's, T President Dick Ruddell said.

"We've tried to be proactive in that," he said. "We have a huge customer service initiative. Every employee is evaluated on this."

The T's customer service department fields complaints — most commonly calls from customers — and turns over the information to McDonald Transit. When a complaint involves a specific driver, that driver is counseled by a supervisor, Ruddell said.

T officials are briefed privately when a driver is disciplined because of complaints or is involved in an on-the-job action that could expose the agency to lawsuits, he said. But the final decision on discipline rests with McDonald.

The T could keep a database of complaints, but T officials have not sought that oversight and say they prefer to let McDonald keep track of the information.

"I'm satisfied they are counseling their employees and doing it properly and showing some improvements," Ruddell said. "We feel like, with the number of complaints, it's going in the right direction."

All aboard for the future

Running the T has not been easy for Ruddell.

Since arriving here six years ago from Toledo, Ohio, he has dealt with a \$2.5 million budget deficit and unhappy residents in Lake Worth who voted to leave the system. A faction in Richland Hills was unsuccessful in persuading voters to do the same in 2004, but talk of exiting is resurfacing again.

Ruddell faces a constant balancing act of trying to cut spending on buses while keeping them running and finding a way to promote and improve the system.

The authority will use \$20 million in federal stimulus dollars, for example, to buy eight articulated buses designed to give riders a trainlike experience. The T is also experimenting with signal-changing technology, so buses encounter fewer red lights.

But to secure the T's future and make it attractive to riders, the agency is banking on commuter rail, not bus.

The Trinity Railway Express is already exceeding expectations by carrying about 10,000 people a day between downtown Fort Worth and Dallas, with stops in Northeast Tarrant County and near Dallas/Fort Worth Airport

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