

## LOCAL NEWS

# DCTA: Accidents can, will happen

Rail line faces scrutiny, defends its necessity in days after 6th incident

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By Bj Lewis / Staff Writer

Even though the A-train has averaged nearly an accident a month, Denton County Transportation Authority officials stand firmly behind the rail line and its importance to the region's transportation future.

Six accidents have occurred since service began in June, with one fatality.

The most recent was Wednesday, when a train struck a pickup that had attempted to drive on the tracks. Denton police arrested two men on alcohol-related charges in connection with the accident.

"DCTA was realistic to note that incidents would occur," said DCTA spokeswoman Dee Leggett. "In any corridor, highway or railroad, incidents occur. We have taken every step through engineering design of the system, education to the community and working with local municipalities to prevent those incidents."

She said DCTA conducts an internal investigation of each accident. No actions have been taken against the agency for any of the accidents.

Since late June, DCTA has spent \$60,000 to repair damages caused by incidents involving the A-train.

Austin's rail line, Capital MetroRail, had been in operation a year before experiencing its first accident. It occurred at a crossing, and a motor vehicle driver was cited for running a stop sign.

The Austin line was among the group of passenger rail lines that DCTA officials looked at early on when molding the shape and scope of the A-train. The group also included the Trinity Railway Express between Fort Worth and Dallas; North County Transit in the San Diego area; the Utah Transit Authority's TRAX in the Salt Lake City area; and South Florida's Tri-Rail, linking Miami, Fort Lauderdale and Palm Beach.

Bonnie Arnold, a Tri-Rail spokeswoman, said in the first year of service the rail line had a small number of incidents.

"It seems to go in waves; one year we had 17 fatalities," Arnold said. "There's always been freight trains on this corridor, and Amtrak. It wasn't like reinvigorating a corridor that hadn't been used for years."

Part of the 21-mile corridor that the A-train uses was dormant for about 20 years before the train began service.

Warren Flatau, acting director of the Federal Railroad Administration, said it is hard to compare one rail service to another because no two areas are the same.

The land around the railroad affects the number of accidents, as does the proximity of businesses and residences, he said.

A lot of the incidents are a function of exposure, just like there are more motor vehicle accidents on a road with a lot of daily use.

The leading cause of rail-related fatalities is trespassing, Flatau said.

Railroad administration data show that 3,347 trespassing-related incidents occurred over the past 10 years, with 298 in Texas.

Flatau said groups like Operation Lifesaver try to help increase public awareness about the danger around rail lines, something DCTA officials say they push for as well.

“Early on, we started the Rail Ready safety campaign, as soon as we started construction,” Leggett said. “What those incidents have told us is that those efforts need to be ongoing.”

The agency is working on a safety campaign to be launched early in the summer, when people are more active, so that all residents — not just motorists — are aware of the dangers.

The incidents haven’t affected DCTA’s outlook on the rail program’s future.

“There’s a human element to what we do,” Leggett said. “It [an accident] is something we don’t want to occur, but we’re confident in our project. We’re confident it’s the right thing for the community and we’re confident in the safety and abilities of our crew.”

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