

DART to change bus routes as rail system expands again

By MICHAEL A. LINDENBERGER

Transportation Writer

mlindenberg@dallasnews.com

Published: 15 January 2012 11:22 PM

Another round of big changes for bus riders is in the works as [Dallas Area Rapid Transit](#) gets ready to welcome new light rail service to [Irving](#) and [Rowlett](#) this year.

DART will eliminate some routes altogether and transform others into feeder routes for the rail service.

Riders worried about the proposed changes can officially weigh in on Jan. 24, when DART holds a federally mandated public hearing to receive riders' comments. By law, the DART board can't adopt the proposed changes until after the staff has considered the public input.

The hearing will take place at DART headquarters at 6:30 p.m. Other community meetings will also be held in Dallas and Irving this week.

The bus changes will save DART up to about \$2.6 million a year once they take effect, said vice president Todd Plesko. That follows a decision last year to cut bus spending \$7.8 million to combat low sales tax revenue.

But the changes, which also include some new routes, are about more than just saving money.

Plesko said as DART grows, it wants rail to be riders' primary method of getting to and from downtown Dallas. Increasingly, buses are seen as feeder shuttles to get passengers from their neighborhoods to the rail lines.

"We are moving to a point where our buses are seen as supplemental to the rail system," Plesko said.

"That's always been the case," added spokesman Morgan Lyons. "When rail is introduced into an area, it has already been decided that it is the most cost-effective way to move as many riders as possible. So those routes do get realigned."

DART now has the nation's largest light rail network, and it continues to grow. On July 30, the new Orange Line will open from Dallas to the Irving Convention Center at [Las Colinas](#). On Dec. 3, the Blue Line will extend to downtown Rowlett and the Orange Line will extend to Belt Line Station at State Highway 161.

Still, the rail network can't take riders everywhere they want to go, as Plesko readily acknowledges. DART rail lines are like spokes attached to a hub in downtown Dallas and do not travel from east to west.

Riders needing to cut across town are for the most part stuck with buses.

The new bus changes include some enhancements for those riders, he added. For instance, a new route 487 will run from downtown [Garland](#) to the west along Jupiter Lane and Forest Lane. It will be a new kind of route for DART that will act more like a train, making only occasional stops. Riders won't lose the local Forest Lane route, the 486, but will have a new, faster way to cut cross town.

Still, Lyons and Plesko said some bus riders will face longer commutes, and perhaps more transfers, as a result of the changes.

"Yes, some riders will find their trips take a little longer," Lyons said. "We are very sensitive to it. But our rail line is a 75- to 100-year investment over time, and once it is on the ground it can't be moved. We can move and adjust the bus lines."

Plesko said the plans are still in draft form, and riders and businesses worried about the changes have already had an impact on the planning. He said the staff welcomes input from riders so it can improve the service and reduce any harm. "This is one group that listens," Plesko said, adding that tweaking bus routes to improve the system is always a tough balancing act between efficiency and maintaining service riders have come to rely on.

Riders can also visit a special DART web page, at bit.ly/2012DART, to register their complaints.

DART's growing rail network means that once again, bus riders will be asked to absorb a lot of changes to their routes. Riders still have time to speak up about the changes before they take effect.

Here's what you need to know:

Bus changes will happen in two phases, on July 30 and then in December. Several routes will be discontinued or cut back because of low ridership, including Routes 27 and 512. Route 515, for instance, would stop operating on Sundays, and Saturday service would stop on routes 553 and 574. Other routes will be eliminated because they essentially duplicate the new rail service, and many other routes will see partial changes. For a complete list, go to www.dart.org.

Rail changes also take effect in two stages. On July 30, Orange Line service to Irving's Convention Center begins. In December, the Orange Line will be extended west to stops at Belt Line Road and North Lake College. In addition, December marks the extension of the Blue Line to downtown Rowlett.

How to be heard: DART hosts a formal public hearing Jan. 24 at 1401 Pacific Ave. at 6:30 p.m. In addition, it is holding a series of community meetings about the changes, including meetings at local library branches on Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and next Monday. For details see, www.dart.org.

Twitter chat: In addition, talk about the changes on twitter using #2012DART. Send questions now, and DART representatives will take questions and answers live through twitter on Tuesday from 1 to 2 p.m.