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Editorial: DART must address riders' concerns



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If 90 percent of your customers said they would recommend your business to a friend, you'd reach for the champagne. That's the kind of word-of-mouth advertising most organizations only dream of achieving.

Although **DART** received precisely this endorsement in its latest customer satisfaction survey, it's not time to pop the cork and pour the bubbly. The

unscientific survey also revealed disquieting trends that the transit agency must fix quickly.

Riders reported that they were less satisfied with the safety, reliability and cleanliness of DART buses and trains than they were in the past.

Sixty-one percent said DART provides enough information about service failures, but that percentage is down from 78 percent in 2007. Even more troubling, some passengers seem to be more worried about crime and their safety on buses and trains. Eighty-five percent said they felt safe, but that number had been more than 90 percent in some previous surveys.

These details are not deal breakers — yet. In the case of crime, DART statistics seem to confirm passengers' worries. Thefts and robberies have increased, and attacks on bus drivers are up to nearly three a month. Fare-evasion citations jumped from about 15,000 in 2009 to 35,000 last year. All of this is occurring at a time when crime citywide continues to decline.

Transit agency officials say new buses will be equipped with security cameras and a barrier to separate the driver from passengers. In addition, DART is installing more cameras on existing trains and buses and using both [undercover](#) and uniformed officers. Later this year, DART plans to launch a texting program to encourage passengers to report suspicious activity.

These are good starting points. DART needs to determine whether its officers are being deployed properly and explain why crime figures are up. Riders might excuse the occasional noisy passenger, late train or dirty bus as an unwelcome nuisance, but they will not tolerate theft or threatening behavior that makes them fearful. DART officers must increase the presence of officers at major rider transfer points, such as the West End bus and train stations, and crack down on

the loitering that undoubtedly contributes to rider perceptions. Otherwise, some of those who have options to drive will abandon DART.

While unscientific, these survey results can't be taken lightly. Perceptions matter, even those that reflect relatively modest disenchantment, because they provide important insights and give DART an opportunity to correct problems before those take a serious toll on ridership. DART is doing many things right but has more work to do.

2011 survey results

DART distributed 50,000 questionnaires to customers, 3,700 of whom participated. A look at some of their responses, compared with those in 2007:

77% said their buses are on time. (80% in 2007)

92% said their trains are on time. (94% in 2007)

75% said their transfers are on time. (85% in 2007)

61% said DART provides adequate notice of delays. (78% in 2007)

85% feel safe on buses. (89% in 2007)

78% feel safe at bus stops or train stations. (80% in 2007)

85% feel safe on trains. (87% in 2007)