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Denton's new A-train cars may help expand regional rail



Al Key/Denton Record Chronicle

The next-generation A-line trains "bridge the gap" for communities that want commuter rail but can't have light rail, one official said.

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The Denton County Transportation Authority has received its first shipment of a new generation of rail cars that officials say could help expand public transit throughout North Texas.

The agency has received four of the 11 Swiss-made diesel cars for the A-train commuter line that runs from Denton to **Carrollton**. The remaining vehicles are expected to be delivered this summer.

The cars, made by Stadler Bussnang AG, offer greater fuel efficiency, more seating and are quieter than older diesel vehicles.

Officials say they are the kind of vehicles that could be used to expand commuter rail on almost 300 miles of existing freight lines. They include the Cotton Belt, **Frisco** and **Ellis County** rail lines.

Light-rail electric vehicles, such as those used by **Dallas Area Rapid Transit**, aren't suitable on railroad lines designed for freight trains.

And traditional diesel-powered commuter rail cars are often criticized for creating too much noise and pollution as they travel through urban areas.

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The new rail cars "bridge the gap for communities that cannot have light rail but want commuter rail," said Dee Leggett, DCTA spokeswoman.

She said the cars can run on freight lines but are lighter, burn cleaner fuel and operate at 70 to 73 decibels, instead of the 80 decibels of typical commuter rail cars.

"It could be a great platform to change regional rail service in North Texas," Leggett said.

Tom Shelton, a senior program manager for the North Central Texas Council of Governments, agreed.

He said the vehicles have been designed to comply with rigorous federal crashworthiness standards.

"They've been designed and constructed to withstand a collision with a freight train," Shelton said. "We'll need more of these for our planned extensive commuter network."

DART possibilities

DART officials also are looking at this type of new technology for future development.

"We have a commitment to look at diesel hybrid electric vehicles," DART spokesman Morgan Lyons said.

He said such vehicles might be suitable for the planned 62-mile Cotton Belt commuter line from Tarrant County to Collin County.

Lyons said hybrid vehicles could run on electric power in urban areas and switch to diesel in less populated areas.

That may allay some of the long-standing concerns of North Dallas residents who have opposed the project because it would increase noise and emissions in residential areas.

"You look at a particular corridor and find the vehicle to fit it," Lyons said.

Waiting on waiver

While DCTA has received some of the Stadler vehicles, they may not hit the rails for a few months.

That's because the agency is waiting for an alternative vehicle technology crashworthiness waiver from the Federal Railroad Administration, which the rail cars are expected to receive.

The agency has been working with the manufacturer for the past two years to modify the fuel tanks, emergency exits, passenger seats, braking systems and other features to meet federal safety requirements.

While the waiver is not required, officials say it will pave the way for Stadler rail cars to be used on other regional rail lines.

"We don't need the waiver to run on the current A-train corridor," Leggett said. "But as a regional partner, we are pursuing the waiver so this vehicle could run on other corridors."

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