

*Dallas Morning  
News*

## **Editorial: Keep DART rail strong**

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Communities served by [Dallas Area Rapid Transit](#) have been warned about "profound" changes ahead because of DART's deteriorating finances, but they should stand fast to protect the region's rail-transit network from the knife.

Annual DART light-rail ridership

1996: 1,290,000  
1997: 7,980,000  
1998: 10,950,000  
1999: 11,350,000  
2000: 11,430,000  
2001: 11,510,000  
2002: 13,730,000  
2003: 16,970,000  
2004: 16,490,000  
2005: 17,490,000  
2006: 18,580,000  
2007: 17,890,000  
2008: 19,440,000  
2009: 18,970,000

Source: Dallas Area Rapid Transit

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Today's rail service and planned expansions represent the promise for coaxing large numbers of North Texans out of their cars for their daily commutes. Rush-hour traffic congestion, if not beaten back, will erode the region's quality of life and business climate. Our metro area can't afford to look and feel like Southern California, and a robust, dependable rail network is a hedge against that outcome. Consider it a priority.

The value of a healthy bus system mustn't be discounted, but bus routes don't have the permanence of rail service. Rail transit, if properly developed, attracts investment for dense development nearby and slows down unsustainable sprawl into rural areas.

Transit-oriented development hasn't occurred lightning fast around DART's 14-year-old rail system, but it's happening nevertheless despite two severe economic downturns. More communities are getting ready for Green Line and Orange Line service in coming months, so DART's level of service should not turn out to be a disappointment to them.

As well, planning should progress on DART's second downtown line and the final Orange Line link, to D/FW International Airport. Even if DART doesn't expect enough of its own money to maintain the current construction timetable, the agency must be ready if other sources can be nailed down.

It's clear that DART will have to tighten its belt to the point that bus riders will feel the squeeze. Cost-cutting shouldn't strand large numbers of them without a way to get to work, however.

How else to trim costs? We'd like to see the transit system offload the job of operating and policing the region's 84 miles of HOV lanes, a job that will consume more than \$12 million this year. In the Puget Sound area of Washington, the state highway patrol enforces carpool laws, and the state highway department has overall responsibility for the roadways.

DART should get out of the business of moving cars on HOV lanes and concentrate on moving people aboard trains and buses, especially as the HOV system expands beyond DART's 13 member cities.

Efficiencies also demand the leanest payroll possible at DART and a look at the overall pay scale. It's notable that DART gave raises to most workers last year, even as the agency was trimming some costs and raising fares (a move followed by a drop in ridership). Meanwhile, City Hall was looking at financial trouble ahead and cut 800 jobs and numerous services, including road maintenance and library hours. DART did not pivot as decisively, raising the question of whether that contributed to today's need for "profound" cuts.

The tougher, longer-range challenge for DART will be adjusting to a new fiscal reality, after a decade's worth of disappointing revenue from the sales tax – which funds nearly all operations – and falling per capita consumption. Every member city has a stake in rethinking DART's core mission, and they need to speak up as the agency lays out budget-cutting options this spring. It will be the most important debate in years over DART's future.