

# TAKE THE A-TRAIN



By Rich Sampson

Near the end of 2010, the Green Line light-rail route of the Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART) network will open for service, reaching its northernmost station in the city of Carrollton. And while that project represents a wealth of opportunities and benefits for the Dallas region, this is not a story is not about DART's Green Line, but rather the new regional rail service that will also call there: the A-Train to Denton County.

Reactivating a historic interurban and freight rail corridor between Carrollton and the city of Denton, the A-Train will share many similarities with other regional rail projects that have recently

A rendering of A-Train vehicles to be manufactured by Stadler, which will arrive a year after the system opens in 2010.

been completed, or are near completion. As part interurban, part light rail, part commuter rail, the new service not only promises quick and easy connections to DART's Green Line, but also a more connected north Texas region.

## Seizing an Opportunity

DART opened its first light-rail lines in 1996 – the Blue and Red lines connecting downtown Dallas with communities to its south. Subsequent expansions of the two lines have brought the network's total size to more than 48 miles of track, while the Trinity Railway Express (TRE) commuter

rail line between Dallas and Fort Worth – the region commonly known as the Metroplex – was also initiated in 1996. As the region's residents grew more familiar with passenger rail and the system fuelled significant economic development around its stations, DART and its member communities – 13 in all, including Dallas – prepared for an even greater build-out of the light rail system. [For more information on DART's light rail network, see RAIL #16, and for more on the TRE, see RAIL #1 – ed]

One such expansion plan envisioned a route heading northwest from downtown Dallas, utilizing an abandoned Missouri-

Kansas-Texas (M-K-T, often nicknamed “the Katy”) Railroad corridor to reach the city of Carrollton – about 15 miles away. The new route – ultimately dubbed the Green Line – was approved in \_\_\_\_ to stretch over 16 miles and serve 12 new stations, including Love Field airport, home to Southwest Airlines. And while the Green Line would terminate at Frankford Road in North Carrollton, the abandoned rail corridor continued to the northwest towards Denton County.

Although not a member of DART, Denton County leaders sensed an opportunity to connect with the new rail line in Carrollton, about 20 miles southeast of the city of Denton. In 2002, Denton County voters approved the formation of the Denton County Transportation Authority (DCTA) to develop and implement a public transportation system in the county, including traditional fixed-route and paratransit bus services, a shuttle system at the University of North Texas (UNT) and a regional rail operation to connect the county with DART’s Green Line.

By 2004, DCTA officials had developed an Alternatives Analysis study of the corridor, which was then opened to community input. As a result of that input, a regional rail line utilizing the abandoned right-of-way was approved by the DCTA Board of Directors as its preferred alternative in May, 2005 and finalized through engineering and environmental impact studies in April 2008. The service was named the A-Train later that year. While the requisite planning and approval process was underway, DCTA and local officials determined they could provide investment for the service independent of federal support.

“There was strong consensus among our residents and elected officials that we had a remarkable opportunity on our hands with this rail line,” says Dr. Charles Emery, DCTA Chairman, who has been involved with the project since its inception. “If we could organize our plans quickly enough and put together the right funding, the stars would be aligned for this project to happen.”

### Destinations and Trends

The A-Train’s route is closely mirrored by Interstate 35-E – the highway

followed the original Katy line when it was constructed in 1959. Yet its path is hardly typical. It links a small-urban area – Denton, with a population of about 80,000 – to a suburban community on the outskirts of a larger metropolitan area, skirting the banks of Lewisville Lake along the way. Meanwhile, its 21-mile route – which became Union Pacific property after it acquired the Katy in 1998 and then was purchased by the City of Denton in 1993 – is considerably longer than most light-rail lines, but also significantly shorter than most commuter rail lines.

However, many strong trends and regional destinations are at work along the A-Train corridor. Denton County

is one of the nation’s fastest growing counties, realizing a population that has increased from 432,000 in 2000 to an estimated 612,000 today. New residents to the area have been lured by the strong employment opportunities throughout the Metroplex, along with expansion at UNT’s campus of 45,000 students on the east side of the city of Denton, and cutting-edge medical facilities at the Denton Regional Medical Center. At the same time, the county’s smaller communities such as Corinth, Highland Village and Lewisville have become popular bedroom communities for those working throughout the multiplex.

The combination of a rapidly-growing region and improved mobility options

The A-Train will connect downtown Denton with DART’s Green Line (shown below in red) in North Carrollton, making five intermediate stops.



via the Green Line led DCTA's planners to plot a service of six stations along the old rail line – in downtown Denton, at the Regional Medical Center, on the south shore of Lewisville Lake near Highland Village and two stops in the village of Lewisville – Old Town and Hebron – before reaching DART's Green Line terminus at North Carrollton. In addition to the rail service, the project would also introduce a corresponding bicycle and pedestrian trail to further enhance the benefits of the revitalized corridor.

“While the connection to the Green Line is obviously important, this project is a much larger asset to this region,”

Emery explains. “We’re re-establishing community centers at the rail stations, introducing first-rate trails for biking and walking, and building a new sense of identity for Denton County.”

Dr. Gretchen Bataille, President of the University of North Texas agrees, saying, “As a University committed to sustainability, this is a natural extension of our efforts. It will be a major asset for our students, faculty and staff to access campus and engage the larger region.”

### Activity in Advance of the A-Train

Part of the long-term approach

envisioned by local leaders is the unification of A-Train stations with nearby activity generators. That effort is underway at the Medpark Station near the Denton Regional Medical Center (DRMC). The medical campus in south Denton employs more than 850 workers, including 280 doctors, nurses and technicians. The Medical Center recognized the value of the coming rail service and sold 12.8 acres of its property to DCTA to locate the new rail station, a 750-space parking facility and bus transfer locations.

“The Medical Center has been a long supporter of the DCTA,” says Caleb O’Rear, Chief Executive Officer of the DRMC. “We recognize that the rail service will greatly expand access to our healthcare facilities by residents throughout the county and will benefit our employees by offering an alternative commute to the heavily congested I-35E.”

And while large public entities such as the University of North Texas and DRMC are playing crucial roles in moving the project forward, the economic development opportunities presented by the service are also being recognized.

Huffines Communities – a Dallas-based real estate developer that focuses on innovative mixed-use projects – has already identified the A-Train’s Hebron Station as a prime location for rail-oriented development around the new service. The company’s Hebron 121 Station development is a \$212 million project that will introduce both residential and retail services, attracted by the thousands of daily riders projected to travel through the station.

“We’ve been anticipating this type of project in Denton County for a long time,” says Donald Huffines, co-owner of Huffines Communities. “There’s a real strong track record of success at many of DART’s stations, and we feel there is a very favorable environment here for the same type of results considering Denton’s strong growth recently.”

### To Carrollton...and Beyond

When the first A-Train pulls into the North Carrollton/Frankford station in December 2010, its initial vehicles will be those that first restored commuter rail in Dallas on the Trinity Railway Express in 1996. DCTA has leased a fleet



DCTA President Emery (left) and Donald Huffines (center) observe plans for the Hebron station (rendering below), where Huffines’ real estate company is planning a mixed-use development project.



of Budd Rail Diesel Cars (RDC) from the commuter railroad to begin the operation. Although the vehicles are now more than a half-century old, they have been well-maintained by the TRE's contracted operations and maintenance provider, Herzog Transportation. Herzog also joined with Archer West Contractors to form the North Texas Rail Group, which was selected by DCTA in 2008 to construct the A-Train system and accompanying trail and then operate and maintain the service for its first five years. The arrangement – much like that between New Jersey Transit and Bombardier on the River LINE – demonstrates a key aspect of regional rail projects – public-private partnerships.

“Working with outside firms that have experience providing passenger rail service was a logical move for the A-Train,” says DCTA’s Emery. “There’s no need to reinvent the wheel, especially when the partners have excellent experience nearby with the TRE.”

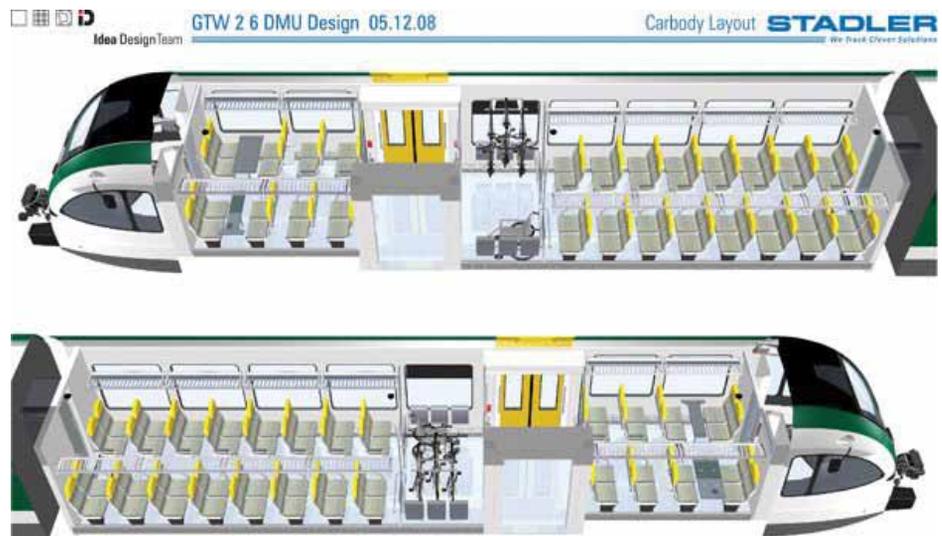
“This is an exciting project to be involved with,” says Kimberly Durnan, Public Information Manager for the North Texas Rail Group. “It’s moved forward with amazing speed, but they also have a well-designed plan and strong support to ensure it’s a success.”

Although the Budd RDCs will help get the service underway with alacrity, DCTA officials also set their sights on a more distinctive and updated set of vehicles to transition the A-Train into a modern regional rail network. A new round of modern self-propelled vehicles were available from several manufacturers that allowed the A-Train to eschew construction of an expensive electric power infrastructure. And since freight trains would not be operating on the route – at least at its outset – the vehicles would not need to comply with Federal Railroad Administration standards for crash-worthiness. In May, 2009, DCTA finalized a contract with Swiss railcar manufacturer Stadler Bussnag AG for 11 of its GTW 2-6 Diesel Multiple Units (DMU). Each DMU can hold up to 200 passengers, are fully accessible and be operated in trains up to 3 vehicles. The railcars are similar to those Stadler is producing for Austin’s Capital MetroRail, and will be delivered to Denton beginning in April 2012.

“Our GTW vehicles have an attractive as well as functionally advanced exterior



Initially, the A-Train will operate Budd RDC railcars (above) used previously by the Trinity Railway Express. In 2012, Stadler’s GTW 2-6 DMUs will begin arriving to replace the venerable Budds.



and interior design,” says Christian Eigenmann of Stadler. “They are suitable for connecting urban with suburban and other middle-range peripheral areas an alternative to congestion and in addition to other existing public transportation options.”

“This is the last piece of the A-train puzzle,” says Emery. “We’ve signed and sealed the deal for DCTA’s next generation of rail cars.”

Regardless of the type of A-Train vehicle that moves passengers between Denton and Carrollton, when its riders disembark at the North Carrollton-Frankford station, connections to DART’s Green Line will be as simple as a walk across the platform. A ticket to board the A-Train will also serve as the fare

for DART’s light-rail network, and arrival and departure times for both services will be closely aligned to ensure maximum connectivity for passengers. The synchronicity between DART and the A-Train is a priority for both agencies.

“The A-Train will be a welcome travel resource for thousands of North Texas commuters,” says DART Spokesperson Morgan Lyons. “Having DCTA as a new regional mobility partner is an important part of meeting that challenge. We look forward to having DCTA customers meet the DART Rail Green Line at Trinity Mills Station and giving our customers a new way to connect with the fast-growing northern cities in our region.”



A-Train construction is underway on the former Katy rail line.

### From Katy to the A-Train

Like the rail line that once hosted trains charging off to many states, today's A-Train route between Denton and Carrollton is once again poised to energize North Texas. By connecting the area's key generators of activity to DART's dynamic transit network, the A-Train signals an approach to regional mobility that's defined as much by the locations it serves as its innovative vehicles or adaptive land use.

Future rail transit projects may bring a new DART light-rail line along the Cotton Belt Corridor north of Dallas, connecting with the Green Line at the Downtown Carrollton station. A new line from Forth Worth may also reach the planned transit nexus. Should those projects come to fruition, DCTA planners have readied expansion plans to bring the A-Train south to yield a multi-faceted rail center, offering direct connections to the east and west.

No matter how future passenger rail plans unfold in the Metroplex, the A-Train will already have established a new construct for regional connectivity.

"Completion of this entire corridor will be a big step in addressing the mobility issues in our region by enhancing air quality, preserving energy resources, and expanding transportation options for our residents," says Emery.



Additional rail transit projects are planned through 2030, including the Cotton Belt corridor, which would link the A-Train and DART's Green Line in downtown Carrollton.