



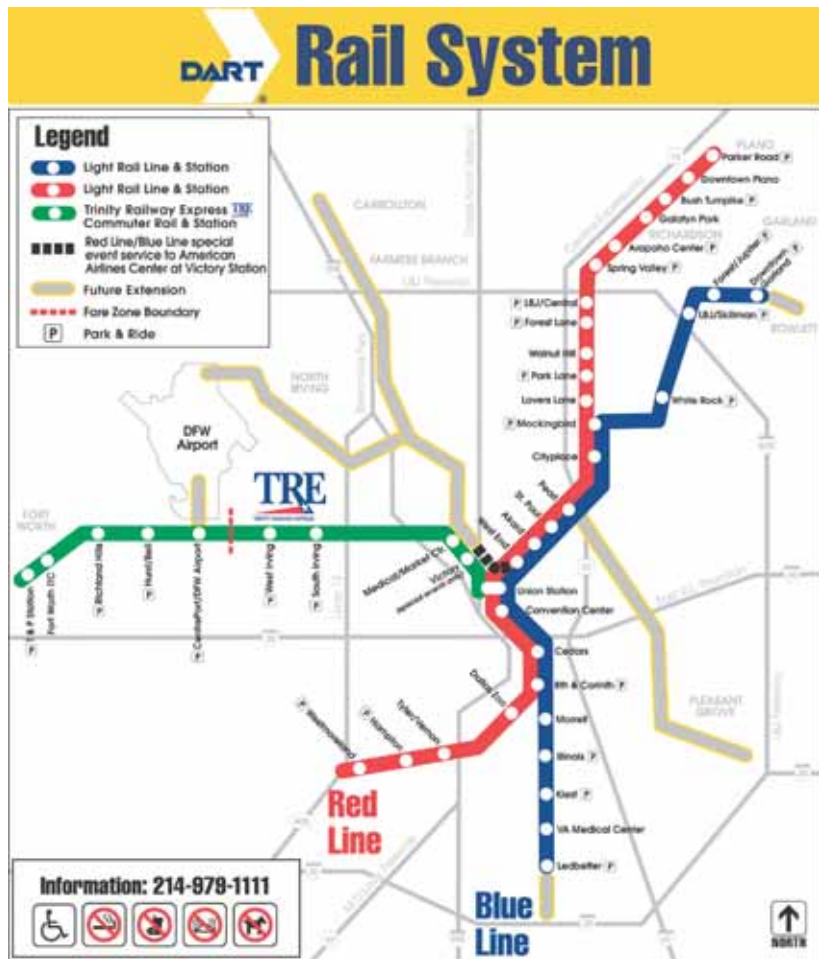
getting it right

By Rich Sampson

Fanning out across northern Texas, the Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan region – or Metroplex, as it is known locally – is as fast growing as any in the nation in terms of population, economic vitality and burgeoning development. The gleaming glass towers of downtown Dallas and Fort Worth are now connected by a sea of communities that have seemingly all grown together.

Twenty years ago, forward thinking local officials knew that the Metroplex's tremendous growth would carry along with it challenges – and opportunities. They understood that a vastly improved regional transportation network of buses and passenger rail would help fight congestion, spur development and, perhaps most importantly, improve the lives of people living throughout Dallas-Fort Worth.

Their vision resulted in, among others, the formation of Dallas Area Rapid Transit in 1983, and beginning in 1996, light rail returning to the streets of Dallas more than 30 years after the city's extensive streetcar network has disappeared. Later that year, commuter rail connecting Dallas and Fort Worth in the form of the Trinity Railway Express began operations.





DART's Red Line was the system's first. New expansions are set to begin operations in 2009.

To the surprise of some and to the delight of local residents, passenger rail in Dallas has been nothing short of a tremendous success – shattering the myth that people in fast growing sunbelt cities don't want or need passenger rail service. In Dallas, indeed, they're getting it right – and light rail is leading the way.

Building Community Consent

With congestion on the rise, jobs, development and residents increasing and regional connectivity stalled, officials in 14 Metroplex-area cities and Dallas County realized that improved public transportation, including a significant passenger-rail system, was vital to their futures. They put the matter to voters on August 13, 1983, proposing to create a regional transportation agency to provide and improve service throughout those areas. Nearly 60 percent of voters approved, and on that date Dallas Area

Rapid Transit (DART) was created and funded with a one-cent local sales tax in all the member cities. Comprised then of the municipalities of Addison, Carrollton, Cockrell Hill, Dallas, Farmers Branch, Garland, Glenn Heights, Highland Park, Irving, Plano, Richardson, Rowlett and University Park, the new agency would serve more than 700-square miles and be responsible for operating an existing bus system, as well as instituting an extensive series of passenger-rail lines, new and improved bus routes, high-occupancy vehicle lanes, and a commuter-rail line between Dallas and Fort Worth.

Needless to say, the nascent entity had a full plate, and its Board of Directors, which was then – and remains today – made up of eight representatives from Dallas and another seven representing the remaining cities, went straight to work in determining priorities to meet its mission. At the beginning of 1984,

the one-cent sales tax began, and DART assumed the operations of the Dallas Transit System. As it was going about enhancing the region's bus network, a massive long-term effort began to come into focus: designing, building and operating a region-wide passenger rail transit network to offer high-frequency and capacity linkages across the service area. Based on the recommendations of its newly established rail division, the DART board selected light rail in September 1984 as the preferred mode for a network of nearly 150 miles of rail lines.

DART's rail team, went to work with the community to answer some important questions: where would it go; who would it serve, what would it look like, and how would it operate? Today's DART light-rail system, and its expansion plans, are the answers to those questions asked more than 20 years ago. From the beginning, DART officials recognized that strong community involvement was essen-

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tial to building a successful network. While light rail had already been instituted in several cities in the United States and Canada at that point, it was largely an unknown phenomenon to Dallas area residents, who harbored visions of intercity passenger trains or subways tunnels.

Current DART President and Executive Director, Gary Thomas, explains that, “In the beginning, there were some questions in the community about why DART was there, in general, and what it would be doing. So, it took some patience, persistence and commitment to work with the whole community, and help everyone not only understand the effort, but also receive their input as we were designing the light-rail system. This was important to us, because we were committed to getting it right – building a system the region would support.”

This commitment to open communication with the community and its residents has served DART well through the years. According to Thomas, that meant listening to concerns about noise and safety and producing renderings of proposed stations and light-rail vehicles, but, more importantly, it also meant sharing all its information and ideas with community leaders and residents to build relationships.

“Essentially, we were asking them to trust us with a very large unknown,” says Thomas. “But, by providing complete and updated explanations of our plans, and by being genuinely concerned about their concerns and input, we were indeed

able to create that trust, and the region discovered the reward of that trust when light rail finally arrived.”

Local community leaders, such as Walt Humann, himself an early advocate of a regional transportation effort, noted that DART’s relationship-building approach gave the agency a strong foundation of support in the region.

“This was done right from the outset because everyone involved acted as a united front,” says Humann. “It was always presented as something that would be a community asset we could be proud of.”



Ongoing communications with the community have helped ensure DART’s success.

As crucial as building community consensus was to the system’s success, so was delivering a network that would attract riders, capitalize on the region’s potential through economic development, and exist as a cost-

Photo courtesy of the Dallas Historical Society



DART's light-rail predecessor, The Dallas Railway & Terminal Company, connected Dallas until the late 1950s.

effective operation. To accomplish these challenging objectives, DART officials in the design and planning, economic development and operations departments began working with Fort Worth-based transportation professionals Carter-Burgess. The partnership allowed design work to begin on the initial phases of the system, which included selecting alignments, conducting environmental assessments, impact studies, community outreach and update meetings, designing stations and studying vehicle options. It was a partnership that would prove beneficial to

all involved.

Tom Shelton of Carter-Burgess, who has worked with DART from its inception, describes his company's role as "providing a full range of expertise and resources to DART, including planning, studies, design and engineering." He adds that, "our team on this project has always been a local group, who live and work here, and have a stake and sense of ownership in producing the highest-quality system."

By 1987, a 20-year overall Transit System Plan had been developed, and the first phases of the light-rail system were laid-out. A 20-mile starter system, stretching from north Dallas through downtown and then branching out to the south and southwest would open first, to be followed by additional extensions to the northwest, north, northeast and southwest. The initial branches would take advantage of well established rights-of-way in their respective corridors, thus speeding implementation of the first lines. According to the plan, the

DART light-rail system would not end with a couple of lines, but would gradually expand its reach throughout the service area, to ultimately become one of the nation's most extensive light-rail networks.

Crafting the Success

Light rail in North Texas got off to an inconspicuous but important start in April 1988, when DART purchased 28 miles of railroad right-of-way from the Southern Pacific Railroad. The acquisition marked the agency's first investment in light rail, as the route would provide access to existing transportation corridors, eventually to reach the region's northeast and southeast. The right-of-way also was vital to deploying the rail service within financial parameters, as acquiring and building on new land would likely have been cost prohibitive for a new system.

With the purchase, DART and Carter-Burgess moved forward into the design and engineering process on the initial 20-mile starter route. By October 1990, initial construction of the first light-rail system in the Southwest was underway. One of the project's most intensive segments, 3.5-miles of bored twin tunnels north of downtown under the North Central Expressway, were completed in January 1994, setting the stage for another first: the only subway in the southern United States outside of Los Angeles. After the sleek Kinki-Sharyo-built light-rail vehicles arrived in May 1995, Dallas was set to realize the benefits of the light-rail network it had worked to create for over a decade.

Trains first began to roll on the system's Red Line on June 14, 1996, between Pearl Station in downtown Dallas, through the West End, Union Station and the Dallas Convention Center, south along the former South-

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ern Pacific right-of-way through Cockrell Hill to Westmoreland Station in West Oak Cliff, and in the median of Lancaster Road to Ledbetter Station in South Oak Cliff. And passengers responded. The new service averaging nearly 20,000 daily riders on the system in its first month of operation, far outstripping predicted levels.

The community involvement process undertaken by DART years before light-rail construction began paid huge dividends.

"We proved to ourselves and the public that citizens, cities and the private sector can attain the impossible dream and do it in a quality way," says Walt Humann.

Gary Thomas of DART agrees: "Our commitment to community involvement in building light rail allowed us to implement a system that was responsive to the needs of the region, and one in which the community could take a strong sense of ownership."

While the initial ridership and operations of the new light-rail system met and exceeded expectations, DART officials and leadership stuck to their plans, continuing to add and enhance the network. In December of that year, another new mode of passenger rail was introduced to the region, as the Trinity Railway Express [TRE] commuter-rail service began daily trips over a 10-mile route between Dallas' Union Station and Irving. The new service would ultimately be extended further west, along the publicly-owned line, first near Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport, and then to downtown Fort Worth, totaling 35 miles (For more on the TRE, see *RAIL* editions

#1 and #12).

Meanwhile, just seven months after debuting light-rail in Dallas, more than seven miles of new light rail track opened along the north end of the system, expanding past downtown through the subway tunnel and alongside the North Central Expressway to Park Lane Station in the city of University Park. The new extension brought an additional 12,000 daily riders with it, boosting the entire system's daily passengers to more than 30,000.

The full completion of the 20-mile starter system, along with the Trinity Railway Express service, brought Dallas residents passenger-rail choices they had not enjoyed for nearly half a century. Light rail rains now served five of the 13 DART member cities, and overall transit system ridership increased by 44 percent from the year before. The achievements led the American Public Transit Association to recognize DART with its Transit Agency of the Year Award.

Sticking to the Plan

The accolades and ridership successes did nothing to sway DART officials from their expansion plans

— if anything, it emboldened them. Light-rail growth continued at its steady pace at the end of the 1990s, as extension projects moved through design and engineering. Fifty-five new railcars began arriving in September 1999, as a spate of four successive expansions were to open to the northern part of the region. Reaching out towards Garland, Blue Line light-rail trains began serving the White Rock Station in September of 2001 and then the LBJ/Skillman Station near the congested LBJ Freeway, adding another 3.5 miles to the system in May 2002. Two months later, its counterpart Red Line extended its reach into the city of Richardson, adding seven new stations from Park Lane to Galatyn Park. By the end of the year, the first phase of the light-rail network was complete, with the Red and Blue lines linking to the downtowns of Plano and Garland, respectively.

The expansions brought the system to a total of nearly 50 light-rail miles and 34 stations, while also offering 35 miles of TRE commuter rail. For DART, it was a good opportunity to take stock of what has been accomplished, and what remained to be done.

"Now that the first phase of our light rail network is complete, DART is focusing on maintaining what we've built, continuing to attract new riders and satisfy our existing ones, and moving forward to meet our commitments to the member cities," says Gary Thomas.

Do It Like DART

Through its light-rail system, DART is connecting citizens



Light rail and commuter rail connect in Dallas.

throughout its service area with a fast, easy and efficient means to access destinations across the region. In doing so, it has found its light rail lines not only to be an excellent way to move people, but also a powerful engine to drive economic development across the network. As Dallas first began to deploy light-rail, the concept of transit-oriented development was increasingly becoming apparent across the nation, and especially in areas such as San Diego and Portland. City and DART officials have recognized the potential advantages for fueling and shaping economic development near light-rail stations.

Guided by its economic development department, DART began outreach to potential developers and business leaders to generate activity around its new routes and stations. One of its first efforts was to assist with the revitalization of the area surrounding the Mockingbird Station, north of downtown Dallas. Prior to DART's arrival this area of the city had largely been industrial brownfields from its previous life as a manufacturing facility for telephone equipment. Taking advantage of a specially designated tax zone in the area to encourage revitalization, DART worked with developers at Union Commercial Urban Centers (UC Urban) to create a mixed-use development, including ground-level retail and restaurant facilities along with loft apartments and commercial offices. By 1997, just as light rail arrived, the first retail and apartment sites were ready, and the revitalization of Mockingbird began.

For Ken Hughes at UC Urban, DART's economic development approach was crucial to advancing the project to reality. "As soon as the line opened, we saw the real impact of light rail," says Hughes. "We needed some of DART's land, and bought

it at fair market value. We also got the rights to build a bridge connecting our building to DART's platform at Mockingbird Station. All this was absolutely essential."

Leveraging the momentum created by the success at Mockingbird, DART moved forward in crafting development opportunities across its system. As Director of Economic Development for DART, Jack Wierzenski notes: "All stations are opportunities. But they don't happen at the same time or overnight. We've had to work with developers and the leadership of our member cities in a three-way partnership to design a vision for a certain station and then devise a plan to make it happen."

As they employed this philosophy for transit-oriented development to station areas throughout the growing network, DART officials found unique challenges and opportunities at each turn. Also, they found eager developers willing to take advantage of the benefits the new rail lines would bring. Projects of varied natures and timeframes took root in downtown Dallas at the Ackard and West End Stations, underused industrial sites near the Cedars Station, and, as lines stretched out to Garland and Plano, similar development patterns followed. To date, the light-rail system has produced over \$1 billion in new development. New transit-oriented development projects in the region are expected to increase by more than 300 percent in coming years. Not surprisingly, developers and community leaders are not shy to praise the system's focus on economic development.

"DART is the whole reason for the Cedars' growth," says Gwen Gaylen who is the President of the Cedars Neighborhood Association, where the former Sears Catalogue Center has been transformed into loft apartments, restaurant and entertainment

getting started



DART stations have created development throughout the network.

venues have sprung-up, and a police headquarters was constructed. “It’s apparent that the rail station is now the centerpiece of the neighborhood.”

Meanwhile, near the Cityplace Station – the only underground station in the system – a 43-story office complex, hundreds of residential units and the West Village Shops now surround the DART station, which also provides a connection to the city’s historic McKinney Avenue Trolley line.

“The area is finally being utilized to its full potential because of the light-rail station, and it was the key to revitalizing a dormant area,” says Cityplace President Neal Sleeper.

To the north in Plano along the Red Line, townhouses, condos, street-

level retail and community facilities – a new park and visitors center – accompanied the arrival of light rail in the historic downtown in 2002. The effort was enough to attract developer Richard Howe to Plano, where he created the 15th Street Village.

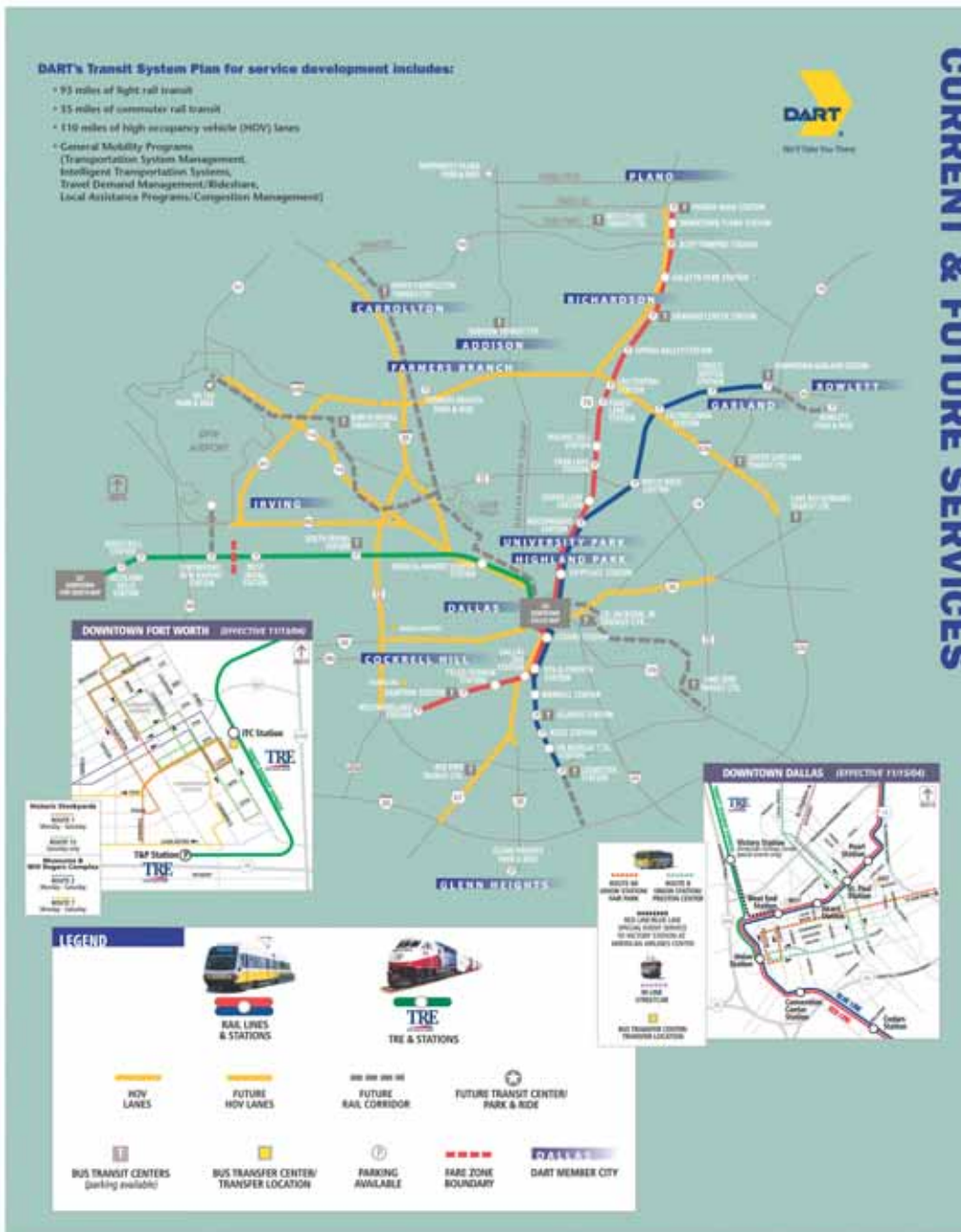
“DART is definitely one of the reasons I built where I did, and it’s a big selling point with our buyers,” says Howe. “It’s an incredible value proposition.”

In agreement are Plano’s leaders, who salute DART’s approach of open local communication and commitment to work with a member city to identify development opportunities nearby and attract developers. Frank Turner, the Executive Director of Plano’s Development Business

Center says, “DART doesn’t just have a transportation strategy; they have a land-use strategy.”

As existing DART stations have driven growth in their vicinities, so too, will its future destinations. At Victory Station near the American Airlines Center – where the local professional hockey and basketball teams play – five new projects are slated to open nearby the station that opened last November. A new hotel, two retail complexes, and two apartment buildings will open in 2006 taking advantage of the steady stream of passengers flowing from DART trains to the numerous events at the arena.

“If you look at all the great cities where they have vibrant urban communities, passenger rail is often a part



CURRENT & FUTURE SERVICES

DART; future development will create a regional light-rail system.

of that,” says Jonas Woods, President of Hillwood Capital, which is designing the Victory district. “For these types of projects, you have to do it like DART, which is to say building a partnership between developers, the community, and the transit agency.”

For DART’s Director of Economic Development Jack Wierzenski and his colleagues, the support shown from

business developers and community leaders alike is proof the agency is both creating, and then meeting expectations of a vision the region has embraced as a whole.

Fulfilling the Commitment

As DART has successfully built its regional transportation network

through a strong collaboration between 13 member cities, the agency’s future will be cast by meeting the obligations and expectations those communities have for more and better passenger rail service. At the forefront of that effort is the continual deployment of the original Transit System Plan, which was revised in 1995, just prior to the debut of the light rail system.

In that plan are five light-rail projects, including new northwest lines to Farmer’s Branch, Carrollton, Irving and Dallas-Fort Worth Airport, to the southeast through Dallas to Lake June, and extensions to the Blue Line on both ends, to Rowlett in the north and Glenn Heights in the south. These projects will expand light-rail service directly to 12 of the 13 member cities,

with Addison remaining the one city without a light rail station.

According to Steve Salin, DART’s Director of Expansion Projects, all lines of the second phase build-out have been completed or are currently in final design. The three new segments will serve vital destinations, such as the region’s two airports at

Love Field and Dallas-Fort Worth Airport, the Medical and Market Centers in Irving, the Texas State Fairgrounds at Fair Park and growing town centers in Carrollton, Farmers Branch and Pleasant Grove. DART officials have an aggressive and specific timeframe for bringing the Phase II extensions on-line. The initial segments of the Southeast and Northwest Corridors will open in 2009, with full completions of those lines expected to Buckner Boulevard in Pleasant Grove and Frankford Road in North Carrollton by the end of 2010. The Northwest Highway branch off the Northwest Corridor line, reaching west to DFW Airport will follow by 2013. All told, the three routes will add more than 40 additional miles to the light-rail system.

Tom Shelton at Carter-Burgess notes the significance of DART's expansion program. "Once completed it will be one of the only true light rail networks in the nation, not just a couple lines. It's a massive task, but one that DART, its partners, and the community as a whole are more than prepared to achieve. It is a credit to DART's leadership in utilizing all the tools in the public involvement toolbox have kept the momentum alive for the next and future rounds of expansion."

In keeping with that spirit of momentum, officials with DART and its member cities are committed to growing the system to meet local demand. Preparations are underway to once again update the Transit System Plan, which will guide efforts towards the year 2030, much like the current plan steers activities to 2010. For the light rail network, this means developing a third phase of projects that will continue to further the system's reach into growing and dynamic areas of the 700-square-mile region. Currently, numerous options are on the table, including studying a new route

through downtown to add to trains on the current route once the Phase II extensions are opened, east-west routes to connect the lines radiating out from Dallas, and the potential additions of new member cities such as Denton and McKinney. One constant will be the tried and true methods of community involvement, innovative strategies, and efficiency and responsiveness in building and operating any new lines.

"We're always learning as we design and deploy new projects, and there is no cookie-cutter approach," says DART's Director of Expansion Projects Steve Salin. "And yet, the process is always the same. We hear from communities and neighborhoods on the specifics of each local environment, and develop a strategy to deliver creative solutions that respond to the community's needs and also development opportunities."

To residents and leaders in member cities still awaiting their light-rail service, DART's arrival cannot come soon enough. Nearly three-quarters of residents in the service area support the continued expansion program, and the voter-approved sales tax – which is funding most of the program – speaks volumes to regional unity on the issue.

"It's crucial to continue the expansion of the DART system," says Mayor Bob Phelps of Farmers Branch. "Our experience demonstrates that jobs and economic opportunity will be created with the Northwest-Southeast Corridor and it will continue to improve the quality of life for the whole area."

Although continuing to grow the network is a high priority for officials with DART, equally important is ensuring that the successes and benefits of the current system continue as it gradually shifts from a planning and building entity into a longstanding service operation. For the system, this means not only maintaining its track,

vehicle and station infrastructure but also providing improvements in the quality of existing services. Options such as increasing the hours and frequency of service, expanding the vehicle fleet, and continual assessment of security systems are all aspects of its operation that DART will assess on an ongoing basis.

DART CEO Gary Thomas stresses the agency's priorities, which he describes as, "maintaining what we've built, sustaining and increasing our ridership, and, on top of it all, fulfilling our commitment to our member cities by continuing to provide the highest quality service and do whatever we can to ensure we provide as much service as possible."

Onwards to Victory

To some, it may seem that the 700-square-mile region that makes up the service area for DART has done the impossible. It has created an expansive regional transportation network, anchored by a thriving and growing light-rail system. But for anyone who's been involved in Dallas' light-rail odyssey, the results are not surprising but valedictory. Transit leaders reached out to their colleagues, neighbors and friends and worked with them to create a system that would not only be successful, but one in which they could proudly claim ownership. That sense of ownership was achieved through a light-rail network that links people with destinations, bridges opportunity and development, and ultimately connects communities to each other.

Perhaps the namesake of DART's newest light-rail station and its next corresponding economic development district is altogether fitting: Victory! ■