

Star-Telegram

T making progress on expansion in far north Fort Worth

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Three years after the Fort Worth Transportation Authority bought land for a park-and-ride lot and transit station near Alliance Town Center, the property remains empty prairie.

But even so, officials say they're making progress on the project near Interstate 35W and Heritage Trace Parkway. When completed, it could lead to dramatic expansion of bus service in fast-growing far north Fort Worth.

"The city requires you to have landscaping, so we can't build it until we can get a water line out there," T President Dick Ruddell said when asked about the planned lot, which was originally to open in 2011.

But Ruddell said the T recently had a breakthrough. Its board agreed in May to split the cost of extending water to the area with a neighboring property owner. The T's portion will cost just over \$64,000.

Now that the agreement is signed, Ruddell said, construction on the lot can begin next year. Officials hope to begin operating express bus service from the Alliance area to downtown Fort Worth possibly in late 2013.

An underserved area

That's good news for Fort Worth's elected leaders, who are pressuring the T to move quicker to expand bus and commuter rail service across Tarrant County.

"Far north Fort Worth is the fastest-growing part of the city and is underserved by mass transit," said Councilman Sal Espino, whose district includes a large chunk of the area. "With traffic congestion along I-35W, residents in far north Fort Worth need options to travel in and around our city. A park-and-ride in far north Fort Worth along with future commuter rail will provide more transit alternatives other than driving in a car up and down I-35W."

If the project encounters further delays, the T could miss an opportunity to gain new customers during the planned expansion of I-35W from Interstate 30 near downtown Fort Worth to Northeast Loop 820.

The Texas Department of Transportation is pushing to start that project by summer 2013, and is working with a developer to include the I-35W work in the \$2.5 billion North Tarrant Express project on adjacent Loop 820 and Texas 121/183.

Once I-35W work is under way, construction delays will likely plague drivers for several years. Thousands of motorists will likely flood neighboring streets in search of detours to and from downtown.

And many south-side residents will likely seek those same detours to jobs near Alliance Airport.

Many of those motorists might be persuaded to catch a bus instead and leave the driving to someone else.

Also, for many people, the T's monthly passes -- from \$50 for a bus-only pass to \$120 for buses and the Trinity Railway Express in either Tarrant or Dallas counties -- would be cheaper than the cost of fuel and parking.

And many employers subsidize workers' transit fares.

A faster commute

The rebuilt I-35W will have a combination of free and toll lanes, and buses will be allowed to use the toll lanes, ensuring a quicker trip to and from downtown, T officials said.

And once the Alliance transit center opens, the T will likely expand bus service in far north Fort Worth. That area is now served by one weekday bus route north of Loop 820 -- the No. 62 Summerfields Express, which picks up passengers once in the morning and returns once in the afternoon.

T officials have expressed interest in expanding bus service to the far north Fort Worth neighborhoods, as well as to the Alliance job centers, with buses likely operating in a hub-and-spoke format to and from the planned transit station near Alliance Town Center.

The T bought the 3.6 acres for \$666,120 from the Baptist Foundation of Texas in 2009.

The lot, which is a few hundred feet north of Heritage Trace Parkway along the southbound I-35W frontage road, would initially have room for 106 cars and could be expanded to hold 202.

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