

## Opinion

---

---

Posted on Mon, Nov. 24, 2003

### **After 20 years of transit, what do we see?**

By Linda Pavlik  
Special to the Star-Telegram

It's easy for me to remember just how old The T is.

My son was born at the same time I was professionally involved with the referendum campaign to encourage voters to literally buy into a transportation authority by approving the collection of a quarter-cent sales tax.

So, just in a matter of the last few weeks, Hank turned 20, and so did the Fort Worth Transit Authority. Growing up for both has been quite a ride!

The push for a transit agency back in 1983 had to be a convincing one -- just a few years earlier, area voters lambasted regional planners for their failure to recognize the autonomy of Texas municipalities.

They overwhelmingly said "no" to the proposed Lone Star Transportation Authority (LSTA), which would have encompassed all the cities in Tarrant and Dallas counties.

Still, a handful of visionaries, like then-Mayor Bob Bolen and then-County Judge Mike Moncrief, jumped out front to sell the concept of public transportation, even though at that time it was simply buses and some services for the mobility-impaired.

Our campaign materials promised that no other municipalities in Tarrant County would be involved, and there would not be any coordination with Dallas. We pledged to keep our adult bus fares at 75 cents and to expand services by 30 percent over five years.

Today, adults pay \$1.25 for a one-way bus ticket, and the sales tax is at a half-cent. Over the past two decades, services did expand. The Fort Worth Transportation Authority provided express bus service to Dallas, offered rides every 30 minutes between Fort Worth and D/FW Airport, introduced colorful trolleys into its fleet, evolved to CNG vehicles, cut down wait time between buses by designating transfer stations in all quadrants of the city, and offered companies the employee perk of the E Pass for unlimited travel on all public transit lines in this area.

The T's most stunning accomplishment has been the construction and operation of the Trinity Railway Express, the commuter train connecting the downtowns of Dallas and Fort Worth through the Mid-Cities.

Just months after The T was established, that agency and Dallas Area Rapid Transit came together to buy the Rock Island corridor for future use. While a team of international and local consultants took about eight years to design and build the TRE in Tarrant County, it was Michael Morris and the North Central Texas Council of Governments who worked with the suburban cities to help them understand why it is important for them to share in the TRE's operating costs.

Although the T and DART have enjoyed the successes of cooperation and shared responsibility for the TRE, Arlington has refused to create an authority in two elections subsequent to the LSTA -- one in 1985 and most recently in 2002.

Major Denton County cities voted in September to fund their own transportation authority, and other communities are feeling pressure to provide transportation services for their seniors and handicapped residents.

Unfortunately, the general economy of late has affected local public transportation -- with less consumer spending, less sales tax money is available.

The T, DART and the TRE experienced service cuts in early October, but the good news is that there's a new, and actually energized, focus on regional cooperation.

NCTCOG's Regional Transportation Council, the Fort Worth and Dallas city councils, the area's major daily newspapers, universities, large corporations, environmental advocates and health care experts are working more closely than ever to address air quality problems, the solutions to which include more and better bus and train service.

The message that we used 20 years ago to create the Fort Worth Transportation Authority is the same today: Act now, because traffic congestion will only worsen. If we don't, our problems will become unsolvable.

As a communications consultant, I generally don't recommend just dusting off old campaigns and bringing them forward as new ideas and concepts. However, when it comes to transportation referendums and public information campaigns, I have been writing the same message for 20 years, and nothing is changing.

If we don't act now, if we don't work together, if we don't make adjustments in our travel modes, if we don't commit the funding for infrastructure and services that include rail, then our congestion and air quality problems could very well become unsolvable.

I just hope that in the near future, I will be able to write that our region is moving, we are breathing cleaner air, and the independent streak of so many of us has given way to the mutually beneficial bond of cooperation.

---

*Linda Pavlik, president of Pavlik and Associates in Fort Worth, is a communications consultant who has been involved in all of the projects mentioned above.*