TEX Rail moves full-steam ahead in July

Despite lack of federal funding, commuter project still on track to open in 2018, according to The T officials

By Sherelle Black

In June the Fort Worth Transportation Authority, known as The T, received permission from the Federal Transit Administration to begin construction in July on TEX Rail.

TEX Rail is a 27-mile commuter rail line that will extend from downtown Fort Worth, through Grapevine and Colleyville, and into Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport.

The project, which has been in the planning stages and a discussion piece among transportation entities and governments throughout Tarrant County since 2005, is expected to begin servicing passengers in late 2018.

Grapevine and Colleyville officials have opposing views on whether TEX Rail is a viable project.

Colleyville Mayor Richard Newton said he does not support the rail project because it does not make sense financially, and he feels The T has not been transparent about project details.

“It’s a billion dollars just to build [TEX Rail], and that’s not counting what it costs to operate it,” Newton said. “Contrast that with [the DFW Connector], which was also a billion-dollar project—but has huge advantages and a huge return on the money that was spent—and I can’t see the justification. Thousands and thousands of people every single day use [the DFW Connector] and it does wonders for this area and nobody can debate the benefits of it, but a billion dollars for a project that maybe 8,000 people [per day] will use isn’t worth it.”

Packaged liquor on Nov. ballot in Grapevine

By Sherelle Black

Known for its annual wine festival as well as its breweries and wineries, Grapevine has become a popular place for residents and tourists looking to partake in a glass of wine or beer. However, by as early as November, residents and visitors may be able to buy more than just beer and wine in the city.

Voters in a Nov. 8 local option election will decide whether to allow “the legal sale of all alcoholic beverages for off-premise consumption only,” which, if approved, would pave the way for liquor stores in Grapevine.

A petition for the ballot measure, which was submitted to the city May 27 by a political action committee, Grapevine Citizens for Total Wine & More PAC, had 5,339 signatures, of which 4,590 signatures were verified by the Tarrant County Elections Administration. Grapevine City Council decided July 5 to send the petition to the city attorney for review.

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The city of Grapevine has contributed more than $70 million toward the project since residents approved a 3/8 cent sales tax to fund the commuter rail in November 2006. Since Colleyville is not participating in the TEX Rail project, it does not contribute sales tax revenue.

Baulsir said if TEX Rail is not fully funded by the next legislative session she will likely make some effort to finalize the project.

"One of the main issues the citizens of Tarrant County were never asked out if they wanted the rail line and were not given the opportunity to voice their opinions via a countywide vote," she said. "Close to $540 million will be coming from the federal government, which is almost $20 trillion in debt. A rail line with a price tag of $3 billion in taxpayer money is not only outrageous, it is unethical because the taxpayers at all levels never voted for such a project."

Baulsir said to date a countywide vote has not been needed for any transportation projects of this caliber.

"I would imagine that all of the cities that are contributing [to funding TEX Rail] took a vote on the rail already," he said. "A majority of folks support this, or we wouldn’t be telling them to start construction," he said.

"If the city does not receive the federal grant by November, Baulsir said TEX Rail has enough funding to continue construction until April because the Federal Transit Administration approved a $2 million grant by November, Baulsir said TEX Rail will likely make some effort to delay the construction of any rail station within the city limits and states the city’s opposition to TEX Rail.

Newton said in 2009, Colleyville council members were debating about putting a station at John McCain Road and SH 18. Residents were participating in a petition against a station. Instead of sending the issue to a public vote, the council narrowly voted to pass resolution banning a train station. Now, Newton said the original resolution had a five-year limit on it, which was why another resolution without limits was passed in May.

Baulsir said if Colleyville decided later to add a station—which Newton said the city has no intention of doing—would be possible.

In neighboring Grapevine, city officials and planners are working on plans for not only a TEX Rail station, but also transit-oriented development.

Grapevine Economic Development Director Bob Farley said the city acquired 4 acres of land at the corner of Dallas Road and Main to build a station. He said the site will not be a traditional train station; instead it will feature a small boutique hotel, an open-air courtyard, retail and public space.

"Council didn’t want to have just a kiosk and a platform, they wanted to accommodate the traveler and see if they couldn’t use the city’s history to build another iconic destination for Main Street that people would want to visit," Farley said.

Although construction on the rail line will be underway this summer, Baulsir said construction on the station will not begin until later this year or early next year.

Additionally, City Council approved a 250-unit multifamily project, Aura Grapevine, which is located down the street from the future TEX Rail station on Dallas Road. The project will include a public dog park, retail space and possibly a restaurant. Construction on the project is expected to start in September.

Colleyville’s economic argument

In Colleyville where a majority of the city’s revenue comes from property taxes, Newton said from a local economic standpoint, TEX Rail does not make sense.

"We’re a residential community, and we are never going to be an urban center," Newton said. "The city doesn’t want the character to change, so money means nothing to me. More money could come in, but it changes the character of Colleyville, I’m not interested.

Baulsir said if Colleyville residents are worried about their home values declining, they should not be talking to the FTA because the TEX Rail is not building a new rail line; instead it is replacing the tracks along the Cotton Belt line.

"[Property values] depends on where you are," Baulsir said. "Obviously there are increased property values when you are a commuter rail station because you don’t have to drive to work, but I guess it depends on where you are and how you look at it."

Colleyville real estate broker and Realtor Sophie Diaz said based on the information she has gathered, TEX Rail could have a negative effect on Colleyville home values.

"It seems only properties back to the tracks may be affected, but it is too early to know," Diaz said.

Newton said although Colleyville has speaking to the FTA about the rail line, he has every intention of having an amicable relationship with the city.

"We are not the enemy," he said. "We are just taking a position and we will do what’s best for the city." Newton said if Colleyville doesn’t want to say they aren’t going to work with [The Texas] Rail, "It may be a done deal, but I don’t think they let those of us off the hook that are in positions that can speak. We should speak up and ask legitimate questions that make you think."