

Light rail runs at heavy price in Dallas, Houston

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Houston's Metro rail is catching up to Dallas' DART trains in ridership, but both systems are more dependent than ever on taxpayer subsidies.

Dallas Area Rapid Transit's light-rail trains recorded 29.9 million passenger trips in fiscal 2015. The newer Houston Metro rail is on track for 23.6 million fares this year if its bullish numbers from March continue.

The competition for ridership comes at a price. DART's rail system receives \$619,960,000 in annual operating subsidies, with local sales tax and the Federal Transit Administration providing the most funding.

Houston's Metro says it averages \$4.75 in subsidies for every rail ride. Multiplied by projected ridership, that comes to \$112,100,000 in taxpayer support this year.

Watchdog.org test-rode the light-rail networks, finding them clean, safe, reliable and seldom full – with some defining differences in operations.

SERVICE AREA: Dallas has 90 miles of track, stretching into the suburbs. Houston has 22 miles of rail, with expansions planned.

DART trains run through Dallas' tony Uptown and out to Plano. Metro, for now, serves Houston's gritty urban core. The Red Line, the north-south spine of the transit network, connects NRG Stadium, home of the NFL Texans, with downtown.

SPEED: DART trains run up to 70 mph to and from the suburbs, passing vehicle traffic along parallel freeways (some of which are tolled). Metro trains max out at 40 mph, and only in short stretches. A "skip" bus route with the same limited stops would move as fast.

FREQUENCY: Houston's Metro has more trains per mile, and passengers rarely wait more than five minutes to catch one. DART wait times can be 10-15 minutes.

FARES: An all-day pass costs \$3 in Houston; \$5 in Dallas.

FARE ENFORCEMENT: Taking multiple trips on DART, a Watchdog reporter was asked only once to present his ticket. Metro has stronger enforcement, with more fare inspectors patrolling rail platforms and riding trains. Neither rail system has turnstiles or ticket takers to prevent freeloaders from boarding.

BOTTOM LINE: On a passenger-per-mile basis, the more compact Metro system leads. In March, the latest month for which statistics were available, Houston trains carried 89,372 riders per mile. DART's more sprawling network averaged 27,685 monthly rider trips per mile.

Both systems remain highly dependent on local and federal support. DART's government subsidies were nearly nine times the amount of its fare revenue of \$71,012,000 last year. In Houston, each \$1.25 Metro rail ticket is supplemented by \$4.75 in subsidies.

With its ongoing addition and extension of lines, Metro's per-passenger subsidies have risen 28 percent since Houston began running light rail in 2011.

In other words, neither train system is making it on volume. More ridership is requiring evermore subsidies to break even.

Randal O'Toole, a public transportation expert with the market-oriented Cato Institute, said rail hasn't helped riders. "To compare two light-rail systems implies that one might have more virtue than the other. In fact, neither is any good," he said.

"Houston has seen a decline in overall [public transit] ridership," O'Toole told Watchdog. "Buses carried nearly 88 million trips in 2001 before light rail. In 2014, bus plus rail was only 72 million trips."

"Houston experienced a short-term gain when it first opened its light rail, then lost all of that gain and more. It experienced another short-term gain when it added five more miles of track, but I suspect it will lose that again soon," O'Toole predicted.

Though Dallas posted ridership gains with the opening of its rail line, "expansions in 2008 and 2011 resulted in no net new ridership," he said, citing statistics from the National Transit Database and the American Public Transportation Association.

Alternatively, O'Toole suggested, "It is always possible to design a bus system that moves more people, faster, cheaper, more flexibly and safer than light rail. No exceptions."