

# Northeast

Star-Telegram

Monday, April 20, 2009

B

NORTH RICHLAND HILLS

## City has vibrant vision for rail station areas

North Richland Hills is embracing a “new urbanism” approach to development.

By CHRIS VAUGHN  
cv Vaughn@star-telegram.com

NORTH RICHLAND HILLS — Talk of “new urbanism,” a blend of retail, residential and revelry all in a walkable space, no longer belongs exclusively to Sundance Square, McKinney Avenue and Mockingbird

Station.

Some historically car-oriented and strip-mall-dense suburbs speak the lingo now, and few suburbs in Tarrant County are catching on faster than North Richland Hills.

First came the city’s Home Town NRH development, a new neighborhood with narrow streets, smaller lots and sidewalks near a shopping center with apartments above the stores.

Now comes a more ambitious, even audacious, plan involving the construction of two heavy-rail stations and the rezoning of close to 500 acres in the Iron Horse and Smithfield areas to create a big-city mixture of commercial, residential and small green spaces.

“The mayor, council and city staff realize their economic development future is dependent on being attractive to a

### More online

■ Information on the proposals, [www.nrhtx.com/RegionalRail/index.aspx](http://www.nrhtx.com/RegionalRail/index.aspx)

■ Proposed commuter rail route, [www.sw2nerail.com](http://www.sw2nerail.com)

broader market — empty-nesters, young professionals, singles, the types of people who traditionally are not attracted to the suburbs,” said Scott Polikov, an urban planner. **More on N. RICHLAND HILLS on 5B**



John Pitstick, North Richland Hills planning director, and Mayor Oscar Trevino have big plans for Main Street. SPECIAL TO THE S-T/BRANDON WADE

# N. Richland Hills: City must join the T

CONTINUED FROM 1B

ner in Fort Worth who was hired by the city to help craft the project.

The city's plan, put together over the past 24 months by city staff, elected leaders and Polikov's Gateway Planning Group, will spend the next few months winding its way through the Planning and Zoning Commission, then the City Council.

So far, little, if any, opposition has surfaced, which one city official called "unbelievable" considering the scope of the plans.

The city's target date for final approval of the zoning changes is July, which they say would allow enough time to apply for several million dollars in development grants that the North Central Texas Council of Governments will award in October.

"The face of North Richland Hills is changing," Mayor Oscar Trevino said. "We talk a lot about Loop 820 and the changes that will be happening there. We don't talk much about what's going on with rail. But it takes these kinds of discussions to know what we're going to look like in 20 to 25 years."

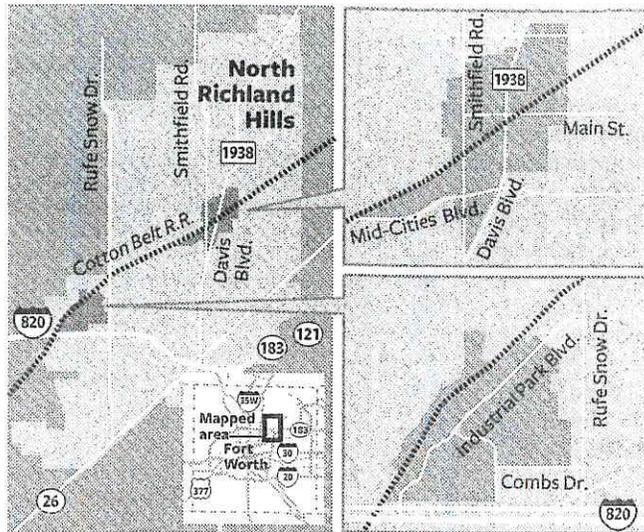
## Not just a platform and parking

Despite being the third-largest city in Tarrant County, North Richland Hills is often overshadowed by other suburbs such as Mansfield, Southlake and Grapevine. But city officials are quick to point out that North Richland Hills lies strategically between downtown Fort Worth, Alliance Airport, Dallas/Fort Worth Airport and Arlington.

Their vision for new growth in their city arose from two developments — plans for a commuter rail line through North Richland Hills, and the success of Home Town NRH, which features some elements of mixed-use zoning.

The Fort Worth Transportation Authority, known as the T, wants to run a commuter rail line on existing

## A proposal for new urbanism



North Richland Hills is hoping to rezone about 500 acres in two areas to capitalize on commuter rail stations and transform the neighborhoods into more urban, walkable environments.

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freight tracks from southwest Fort Worth, to the north side, Haltom City, North Richland Hills, Grapevine and D/FW Airport. It aims to start service in 2013. North Richland Hills would have to join the T for stations to be built there.

"The mayor and council didn't want just a train platform surrounded by parking," said Mike Curtis, director of development services for North Richland Hills. "They wanted to look at what the possibilities could be."

## Two stations, two parts of town, two looks

Because North Richland Hills is hemmed in by other cities, its leaders said they needed some way to maximize their tax base and population, in addition to taking advantage of the volume of train riders they anticipate.

The goals for the two areas reflect the differences in each part of the city.

The zoning around the Smithfield station would take advantage of the area's historic character, churches and nearby neighborhoods and feature more shops, cafes and low-density apartments. City leaders want the Iron Horse station, in a mostly big-box retail and industri-

al area just north of North-east Loop 820, to have denser and taller buildings for residences and businesses.

But overall, for a suburb largely built on the primacy of the freeway and two-car garage, the possibilities outlined in the plan are nothing short of revolutionary:

- Two- to three-story buildings would allow businesses at street level and apartments above them.
- The buildings would be at the sidewalk with parking in the back or side.
- In certain areas, architectural styles would be enforced.
- Businesses would not be allowed to have drive-throughs.
- Parking would not be required for small businesses.
- Certain streets, such as Main Street and Smithfield Road, would be narrowed to create on-street parking.

What they envision is people who live in far north Fort Worth or Keller driving to a rail station in North Richland Hills and staying for dinner or a drink after work, and they envision attracting young people or retirees to live in an apartment above a business because of the amenities and easy transportation nearby.

They see small businesses and "pocket parks" and pedestrians who can park once and visit multiple places.

Owners whose land uses do not comply with the new zoning, such as industrial and auto-related businesses, would be grandfathered in, officials said. City Planning Director John Pitstick believes that the requirements provide "flexibility for the current owners and predictability for the future."

Cynthia Waller, who lives in the Smithfield area, said she does not know the details of the plan but likes what she hears.

"It sounds very ambitious," she said. "Honestly, it would be nice to have more around here as far as restaurants. I don't know if we'll still be here when it all happens, but it would be a nice boost for the area."

## Complementing, not replacing, the suburbs

Unlike Addison Circle or Sundance Square, Polikov said, North Richland Hills will have single-family neighborhoods nearby to help sustain the development.

What Polikov calls "first-ring suburbs" are getting into the concepts of mixed use more. Garland, Mesquite and Duncanville, he said, are all pursuing new-urbanism projects.

"This is nothing new," said Polikov, who serves on the board of the Congress for the New Urbanism. "We're just taking advantage of it in the Texas context. Some of the cities think it's an all-or-nothing proposition with urban villages. I don't see it replacing the suburban model of large-lot, single-family homes. I see it as complementing them. You need the full gamut of people who can live in your town."

"Why should you as a city force a retiree with income to leave town if he wants to walk to get a latte and a *New York Times*?"

The scope of the rezoning is massive and highly atypical, North Richland Hills officials said. But they say they want to rezone such a large area to make sure that future mixed-use development blends with the existing neighborhoods.

Most of the questions and concerns about the rezoning have come from homeowners in the Smithfield area worried about commercial encroachment, and city officials say they have varied the zoning to ensure that neighborhoods of single-family homes are protected.

"This is a multi-year development," Curtis said. "We want something that when it is complete is going to fit into the surrounding neighborhoods."

#### **Joining the T and raising the money**

One big hurdle remains, though — North Richland Hills is not part of the T, and until it is, it cannot have a train stop.

Cities pay for T service, but since North Richland Hills has reached the state limit on the sales tax it charges, it would have to come up with another way to raise the necessary money. The city is pushing legislation in Austin that would allow the city to join the T, provided voters approve a funding mechanism.

The redevelopment of the Iron Horse and Smithfield areas is not completely dependent on train stations, but city officials acknowledge that the rail line is the biggest draw.

"If we don't plan for it today, our citizens are going to wonder why they can't get on that train when it goes by," Trevino said.

CITY GOVERNMENT

# North Richland Hills OKs rail-focused development

The changes could alter the look of the Smithfield and Iron Horse areas.

By CHRIS VAUGHN  
cvaghn@star-telegram.com

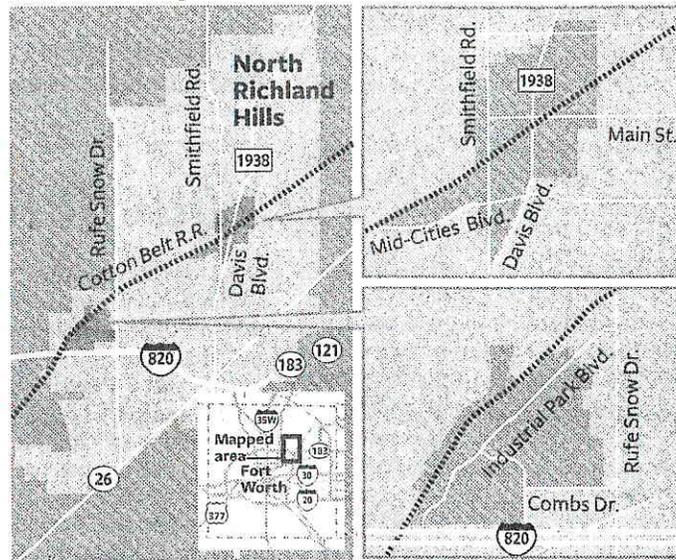
**NORTH RICHLAND HILLS** — The city's plans to join an emerging commuter rail network in Tarrant County may have fizzled in the Legislature, but the City Council is pushing ahead with planning for rail stations and surrounding development in two neighborhoods.

On Monday night, the council unanimously approved changes to the city's comprehensive plan that create "transit-oriented developments" in the Iron Horse and Smithfield areas. Next month, the council is expected to vote on rezoning hundreds of commercial and residential properties within those boundaries.

Before Monday's vote, Mayor Oscar Trevino — a major supporter of a regional rail line that will run from southwest Tarrant County to Dallas/Fort Worth Airport — rebuked the Legislature for failing to pass a bill that would have let communities like North Richland Hills seek voter approval for taxes or fees to fund rail projects. That means the city still has no funding mechanism to join the Fort Worth Transportation Authority.

"We can sit here and bury our heads in sand and play like the Legislature and say, 'We don't need to do anything,'"

## Rail developments



North Richland Hills changed its comprehensive plan to create "transit-oriented developments" near two proposed rail stations in the Iron Horse and Smithfield areas.

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Trevino said. "Or we can move ahead and be ready when the Legislature decides they will be leaders. [Rail] is the future of this region. We need to be ready when it comes."

For two years, the city and consultants from the Gateway Planning Group have envisioned creating two train stations in North Richland Hills and surrounding them with mixed-use development of retail, apartments and green space akin to Mockingbird Station in Dallas or Addison Circle.

City officials have pursued a plan to rezone almost 500 acres and have drawn up ordinances that would prohibit

certain uses, such as drive-throughs, allow others, such as on-street parking, and enforce architectural standards.

The zoning around the Smithfield station would take advantage of the area's historic character, churches and nearby neighborhoods and would feature more shops, cafes and low-density apartments.

City leaders want the Iron Horse station, in a mostly big-box-retail and industrial area just north of Northeast Loop 820, to have denser and taller buildings for residences and businesses.

CHRIS VAUGHN, 817-390-7547

Publication: Star Telegram; Date: May 4, 2015; Section: First News; Page: 1A

# The T is ready to buy eight TEX Rail cars

It also agreed to hire a firm to handle preparations for construction.

**By Gordon Dickson**

gdickson@star-telegram.com

Efforts to start the proposed TEX Rail commuter train service by 2018 are gathering steam.

Fort Worth Transportation Authority board members recently approved the purchase of eight self-propelled diesel rail cars to operate on the proposed 27-mile rail line and agreed to enter several contracts that will help get the project underway. The rail would carry an estimated 10,000 or more passengers per day from downtown Fort Worth to Grapevine and Dallas/Fort Worth Airport's Terminal B.

The T agreed to a contract with a firm to handle preparations for TEX Rail construction, which could begin next year, approved the purchase of several properties to make way for the project, and OK'd a final design contract for two stations in North Richland Hills.

"This is really the first major milestone for the project," said Bob Baulsir, the T's vice president of TEX Rail and procurement.

## **Not all funding in place**

The moves, expected to cost a combined \$115 million, were made even though TEX Rail hasn't received the full federal funding to cover the cost of the project. In all, TEX Rail is expected to cost \$862 million.

**More on TEX RAIL, 14A**

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# TEX Rail

Continued from 1A

million, with federal money needed for roughly half.

Even without funding, the Federal Transit Administration could give the T the go-ahead to buy the cars by granting its request to "enter into engineering," a procedural step T officials hope could come as soon as this month. The FTA's governing rules for new-start passenger rail lines say transit agencies may have "pre-award authority" to make certain purchases that will eventually be reimbursed with federal funds, even if the overall project hasn't gotten final approval.

The timing of a full-funding grant agreement from the agency depends on how quickly the T completes the remaining steps in the federal application. Under such an agreement, the federal government essentially pledges to provide the full amount of money needed. The appropriations are often spread over many years and can be subject to congressional approval of mass transit funds.

### Light-duty cars

The eight rail cars were by far the largest expenditure authorized last week. They will be ordered from Switzerland-based Stadler Bussnang AG, which has a Stadler Rail U.S. branch in New Jersey. Each car costs \$10.775 million. With engineering and other expenses the total tab is expected to be \$106.7 million, although the T has options to buy more cars that would increase the cost.

Stadler and three other companies were invited to talk to the T about its needs for TEX Rail. The others are US Railcar, Nippon Sharyo and Bombardier, T officials said. But only Stadler eventually responded to the T's request for proposals. The other companies said they couldn't comply with the federal government's "buy America" requirements



The T plans to build a TEX Rail station at the northwest corner of Loop 820 and Iron Horse Boulevard in North Richland Hills. Star-Telegram/Rodger Mallison



Another TEX Rail station would be built on Smithfield Road in North Richland Hills. Star-Telegram/Rodger Mallison

for purchases involving federal money.

The T has \$25 million on hand to place the order for the cars and has access to state and federal grant funds as well as millions of dollars in its fund balance to cover costs if there are delays in getting the full-funding grant agreement from the transit agency, or new-starts funding from Congress. The T can also issue debt if necessary, Baulsir said.

The rail cars are a type known as diesel multiple units. They are self-propelled, with the engines embedded in the passenger cars, so a locomotive isn't needed.

The operator rides in a control room at the front of the lead passenger car.

### Controversy over cars

Stadler cars were in the spotlight beginning in

2012, when an electrical problem known as shunting caused a Denton A-train to disappear from a dispatcher's control panel. Shunting occurs when the electrical signal sent by trains through the metal railroad tracks is interrupted by any of several factors, including dirt or rust on the tracks.

In the case of the Stadler cars, a former Trinity Railway Express chief mechanical officer criticized the T in a 2013 *Star-Telegram* article, saying he was concerned that the Stadler cars were a safety hazard because they were too light to provide a continuous signal. Shunting could prevent a train from triggering the gates and lights at a railroad crossing, for example.

But Baulsir says the Stadler cars the T wants to buy for TEX Rail have

twice as many wheels as those used by the A-train, and he expects no difficulties with shunting. Baulsir also said passengers will be thrilled by the streetcarlike comfort of the Stadler cars, which feature ample standing room, panoramic windows and very little rattling or other noise.

### NRH stations

The T board also agreed to enter a \$527,590 contract with the Urban Engineers firm to design two TEX Rail stations in North Richland Hills: one at the northwest corner of Loop 820 and Iron Horse Boulevard, the other on Smithfield Road between Mid-Cities Boulevard and Main Street.

TEX Rail would then have 10 stations. The North Richland Hills stations were initially left off the environmental plan-

ning document for TEX Rail.

Although North Richland Hills currently doesn't have sales tax capacity to join the T — Fort Worth, for example, dedicates a half-cent to the T and Grapevine pays 1/3 cent — city officials are in discussions with the T to determine how to help pay for TEX Rail and get the two stations open, City Manager Mark Hindman said.

"We are establishing tax-increment finance districts that will pay a large portion of the costs out of the incremental value that will derive from the transit-oriented developments that we have laid out around the two stations," Hindman said.

### Land purchase

The T board also approved the purchase of several small pieces of property on the northeast end of downtown Fort Worth, where a new stretch of railroad tracks will be needed to get TEX Rail out of the Intermodal Transportation Center and onto the Union Pacific tracks heading toward the Stockyards.

The properties are at 1519 and 1525 E. Belknap St., and 1604 E. Bluff St.

Gordon Dickson,  
817-390-7796  
Twitter: @gdickson

Publication: Star Telegram; Date: Aug 3, 2015; Section: Metro; Page: 6A

# North Richland Hills gets aboard commuter rail project

City will have two TEX Rail stations and create TIFs to pay its share of costs.

**By Gene Trainor**  
Special to the Star-Telegram

**NORTH RICHLAND HILLS** — The city has officially joined the TEX Rail project by approving an agreement to participate in the planned commuter rail.

City leaders said they believe that the stations planned for Iron Horse Boulevard and the Smithfield area will be catalysts for development on nearby property, besides giving residents a transportation alternative. The rail line will link downtown Fort Worth and Dallas/Fort Worth Airport.

City Councilman Tom Lombard compared the rail line to the city's opening of the Iron Horse Golf Course in 1989 and to the city's extensive trail system.

"I think this is a big, big game-changer for us," Lombard said.

Tarrant County's population is expected to increase from 1.8 million residents in 2010 to 2.06 million residents in 2020 and 2.3 million residents in 2030, according to the

Region C Water Planning Group.

"Building more roads to address congestion is impractical, unsustainable, cost-prohibitive, and none of us like sitting in that traffic," Mayor Oscar Trevino said at a recent City Council meeting. "A lot of people don't think it's going to be here. That rail is going to be running through North Richland Hills, and we deserve stations on it."

The city will pay for its contribution to the project, overseen by the Fort Worth Transportation Authority, by creating tax increment finance (TIF) districts, or something similar, around the station areas and using TIF revenue from the city's Home Town NRH area. TIFs typically take the tax revenue gleaned from a property's added value from development and use the money for public projects. The rail project is not expected to impact the city's property tax rate, city officials said.

The 27-mile TEX Rail line will begin at the T&P Station in Fort Worth and continue northeast through Haltom City, North Richland Hills and Grapevine and on to Termini-

nal B at DFW Airport. The North Richland Hills stations will be at 6416 Smithfield Road and near Iron Horse Boulevard, a half-mile north of Northeast Loop 820, according to Transportation Authority and city documents.

Commuter rail line is expected to begin transporting passengers in 2018 and cost more than \$800 million. The money is expected to come from federal, county and local dollars.

Participating communities were expected to approve a half-cent sales tax to cover their share of the project. But North Richland Hills is at its state-mandated 2 percent cap, with 1 percent of its sales tax revenue going to the general fund and half-cent sales taxes going to crime control and parks and recreation. The TIF represents a compromise and allows the city to join the regional effort, city officials said.

The City Council voted 7-0 July 13 to allow City Manager Mark Hindman to enter into an agreement with the Fort Worth Transportation Authority to allow the city to participate in the TEX Rail project.

# Mixed-use development planned around North Richland Hills Tex Rail station

BY GENE TRAINOR  
*Special to the Star-Telegram*

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NORTH RICHLAND HILLS — A mixed-used development aimed at young professionals and akin to the booming West Seventh Street corridor in Fort Worth is in the works for the area near a planned rail station.

Sitting north of the recently completed North Tarrant Express project and running parallel to the Cotton Belt rail line, Iron Horse Village will eventually include 469 high-end apartments, though initially 257 apartments will be built in the first phase, said Robin McCaffrey, an architect and planner who is coordinating the project for Dallas-based developer Dan Smalley.

Called a “transit oriented development,” the estimated \$70 million project will play off a planned station for the TEX Rail commuter rail that will link downtown Fort Worth and Dallas-Fort Worth Airport. The apartment complex will be a few hundred yards from the rail station and within walking distance of shops and restaurants in North Richland Hills, Tarrant County’s third largest city.

“I don’t actually have to own a car if I don’t want to,” McCaffrey said. “Only a few places can offer that capability.”

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## **THE DEVELOPMENT WILL SIT NORTH OF THE NORTH TARRANT EXPRESS.**

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Iron Horse Village will be part of a 100-acre development plan that will be divided into sections, city planning manager Clayton Comstock said.

Comstock said once the multifamily developments are built, “retail will come naturally.”

Another section is mostly commercial and could feature office buildings up to 10 stories high in an area fronting Loop 820/North Tarrant Express. That area now houses a Sam's Club, WalMart and other big-box retailers. City officials hope that the option to redevelop that section into office towers will prevent businesses from just leaving empty big-box buildings should they ever leave their present site.

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# 257

apartments planned for first phase

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The train station is expected to open in 2018 when the rail line begins service. Other stations are planned for Fort Worth, Grapevine, Haltom City, Dallas/Fort Worth Airport and the Smithfield neighborhood of North Richland Hills, according to the Fort Worth Transportation Authority, which is overseeing TEX Rail.

The first floors of the buildings in Iron Horse Village will be marketed as business space, but the developer may allow tenants to live there, depending on how quickly restaurants, shops and bakeries move in, McCaffrey said. The buildings in that section will be limited to four stories, Comstock said.

“Our style is not going to be some sort of retro image of the 1890s,” McCaffrey said. “It’s going to be a more contemporary style structure for the younger, more hip market. I think we can offer everything that they’re looking for.”

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**IT’S GOING TO BE A MORE CONTEMPORARY STYLE  
STRUCTURE FOR THE YOUNGER, MORE HIP MARKET.**

Robin McCaffrey, an architect/planner

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Construction is expected to begin in about seven to eight months. The first apartments should be available in spring 2017. McCaffrey said he did not know what rents will be, but they will be at least what is being charged in the HomeTown NRH planned development

off Boulevard 26. Apartment owners there charge monthly rents anywhere between about \$900 for a 628-square-foot loft apartment to about \$3,000 for a 2,400-square-foot, four-bedroom apartment.

The final section, north of the transit area, will be single-family homes, town houses and some businesses, Comstock said. He said he expects single-family homes to dominate in that section of the development.



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### COMMENTS

# Ceremony marks start of TEX Rail project



BOB BOOTH Special to the Star-Telegram

Grapevine Mayor William D. Tate, center, and North Richland Hills Mayor Oscar Trevino, right, leave Wednesday's ceremony with other dignitaries.

## ■ Commuter trains are planned to begin running in late 2018 along a 27-mile route from downtown Fort Worth to North Richland Hills, Grapevine and DFW Airport's Terminal B.

BY GORDON DICKSON  
gdickson@star-telegram.com

### GRAPEVINE

Ceremoniously riding in a train pulled by a 1953 vintage diesel engine, leaders from Fort Worth, Grapevine and North

Richland Hills on Wednesday celebrated the beginning of a commuter rail project they say will change their communities.

"Where the rail goes, the communities flourish," Grapevine Mayor William D. Tate said during a groundbreaking ceremony for the TEX Rail project

outside his city's historical Main Street Depot. "Where it passes them by, they wither and die."

Wednesday marked the official kickoff of the \$1.034 billion project, which is more than a decade in the making. The commuter trains will begin running in late 2018 with routes as frequent as every 30 minutes during peak workday periods and about every hour during non-peak periods.

The project isn't fully funded, but Fort Worth Transportation Authority officials say they have enough money and permission from the federal government to get started on construction. The project includes nine train stations along a 27-mile route from downtown Fort Worth to North Richland Hills, Grapevine and DFW Airport's Terminal B.

SEE TEX RAIL LINE, 9A

# TEX Rail

TEX Rail commuter trains are expected to begin service in late 2018, connecting Fort Worth, Grapevine and North Richland Hills.



Source: Fort Worth Transportation Authority

Star-Telegram

won't dedicate a sales tax to the rail project and instead will look for a special taxing arrangement with developers interested in building around the stations, said Clayton Comstock, the city's planning manager.

Self-propelled rail cars made by Swiss-based Stadler, which is opening a factory in Salt Lake City, have already been ordered for TEX Rail and should arrive by January 2018, officials said.

Wednesday's ceremony in Grapevine was attended by more than 100 students from The Novus Academy, a private school in Grapevine.

Eighth-grader Chris McMahan, 13, said he looks forward to a future with more transportation options.

"Riding in cars can get boring but riding in trains is more enjoyable," he said. "If it's going to be from Fort Worth to here, I could probably take it to school."

Fellow eighth-grader Lucas Brothers acknowledged that he doesn't share the enthusiasm for trains with many of the railroad buffs who attended Wednesday's ceremony, but he sees the attraction of public transportation.

"I don't really like them very much, but it gets me where I want to go, so I guess it's better than car driving," Brothers said.

Then he quipped, "It's better than Uber."

Gordon Dickson: 817-390-7796, @gdickson

FROM PAGE 1A

# TEX RAIL LINE

Scott Mahaffey, the transportation authority's chairman, promised an audience of about 300 people in Grapevine that TEX Rail will offer the ultimate in modern comfort and convenience.

"It will be premier service. It will not be just transit," Mahaffey told the crowd. "There will be USB ports. We will have quiet cars. That's an area you can go in ... and work and sleep and do other things."

After the dignitaries' remarks in Grapevine, several dozen attendees

boarded the Grapevine Vintage Railroad train for a ride to North Richland Hills and downtown Fort Worth, where similar groundbreaking ceremonies were to be held. The ceremonial ride was held in the same corridor that

will be used for TEX Rail, although many of the railroad tracks and ties will need to be replaced before the modern rail cars

roll on them.

Rebuilding the corridor and installing nine passenger platforms is an admittedly ambitious plan but can be done, said Bob

Baulsir, the transportation authority's vice president of rail and procurement. At first, residents will see mostly prep work along the rail lines, but stations will be built in the coming months, too.

Also, a maintenance facility will be built in north Fort Worth, not far from a station in the city's Mercantile area.

More than \$400 million for TEX Rail has already been raised, mostly from local sources including sales taxes in Fort Worth and Grapevine.

North Richland Hills has committed to paying the equivalent of a 3/8-cent sales tax for two TEX Rail stations beginning in 2022 and continuing through 2035. That works out to about \$2 million to \$3 million a year, one official said. However, that city

## 2018

The year TEX Rail service is scheduled to begin

## BUSINESS

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