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Approaches to city's public transportation woes vary widely

Fort Worth Star-Telegram-April 27, 1997

Readability: >12 grade level (Lexile: 1310L)

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ARLINGTON - To find evidence of the need for public transportation, one needs look no further than 210 W. South St.

Hundreds of residents regularly call upon Mission Arlington for help in getting where they need to go, and the center's three minibuses can't come close to filling the need.

"We are doing it, but of course it's not adequate," said Tillie Burgin, the mission's founder and director. "We turn people away. We have three buses going all day, and there's still people that we aren't able to get to."

This year, the cry for public transit has been reflected in the platforms of many mayoral and City Council candidates, most of whom said that filling the transportation void is a high priority.

Arlington has Handitran, a transportation service for the disabled and elderly, and a trolley system that takes hotel guests to various entertainment destinations. But the issue of how to reach more people through different modes of transportation is under discussion, and a report on the subject is expected in September.

With most of the candidates agreeing that Arlington doesn't need a citywide bus system - referendums to establish mass transit were rejected in 1979 and 1985 - the problem is how to develop a system catering to Arlington's needs and how to fund it.

Beyond that, many candidates also are looking toward street improvements and new roads - two mayoral candidates have suggested building a new north-south road through Arlington - to address traffic congestion and air-quality concerns.

Already, several subcommittees are putting the finishing touches on a five-pronged public transportation plan developed over two years by a 16-member committee. The approach is designed to gradually ease transit-wary residents into a system whose branches are independently operated.

The five transportation "niches" include a privately run shuttle or jitney service that would begin along Cooper Street and gradually ease into other routes; a south Arlington retail shuttle; expanded minibus service for the handicapped and elderly; traffic reduction strategies such as ride-sharing, telecommuting and work-at-home options; and the trolley system already operating in the Entertainment District, which some candidates have said could be expanded.

"These are not, in themselves, what I would call a form of mass transportation," Transportation Director Mike Hasler said. "They are intended to target certain areas, rather than an overall city system. We want to start small and grow."

Most of the candidates call the niche approach a good first step. They tend to favor using private companies to run and finance the systems over public dollars, but several didn't rule out the possibility of using public money for startup costs.

The subcommittees that have been studying the niche concepts hope to have a south Arlington shuttle operating in time for the next Christmas shopping season, Smith said. A study to determine route for the jitney service also is pending, and the Handitran committee is looking at expanding the service to Sundays and holidays, she said.

Additional transportation options - such as bus service to Fort Worth and Dallas - could be explored, depending upon the response to the niche plans, she said.

"If these meet the needs of citizens in Arlington, there won't be a need to go any farther," Smith said.

In addition to addressing transit systems that will reduce the amount of traffic on Arlington's roads, most of the candidates also want road improvements.

Several of the candidates said that they are interested in building another north-south road through Arlington and that they would fund such a project with federal, state and perhaps some public dollars. Others are interested in a light rail line within Arlington that could link up with the Railtran line that runs north of the city.

Burgin, whose agency provides gas vouchers, bicycles and even taxis as well as the buses to help transport residents, said she is looking forward to any additional transit systems.

"I would imagine there's been enough study," she said. "To me, we're all in agreement that the need is there."

Staff writers Jennifer Autrey, Matthew Brady and Barbara Powell contributed to this report.

GRAPH(S): Candidate positions on community transportation (see microfilm

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