

*Light rail, used in Dallas for years, is making its way north. Will Frisco get on board?*

*photo by Chris Fritchie*



future or it's possible that Frisco could be left behind other cities. Our city has done a great job of planning, even winning statewide awards for the best Comprehensive Plans in 2000 and 2006. Each of those plans included at least three rail stations. People moving to Frisco constantly applaud our planning and the way we've stuck to it. Bringing rail to Frisco would be a way of continuing that tradition.

The future of a rail system in Frisco needs to be decided in the near future or it's possible that Frisco could be left behind other cities.

Over the years, Frisco's city council has developed Strategic Focus Areas and annual priorities that target the development of a regional mass transportation plan and local inter-city people movers to help improve air quality and reduce traffic congestion. Frisco has worked with other cities and organizations such as DART, the Denton County Transportation Authority (DCTA), North Central Texas Council of Governments, as well as Denton and Collin Counties to help determine how and when passenger rail would come to Frisco.

Frisco is in the 2030 Mobility Plan as are the cities of McKinney and Allen. This Mobility Plan covers the entire DFW area, which will grow from six million people today to over nine million in 2030. It covers everything from air quality improvement to sustainable developments, bicycle and pedestrian movement, transportation safety, congestion management, road systems and regional aviation. One

## Defining Our History, Determining Our Future

By Mike Simpson

**WHETHER YOU ARE** a long time Frisco resident or a newcomer to our city, you probably know that the railroad put Frisco on the map. Not only did Frisco get its name from the St. Louis – San Francisco Railroad in 1902, the railroad also helped define the future of the city which had been a farming community until then. It became our “port of entry,” according to long-time mayor and former Frisco railroad agent Harold Bacchus. It helped the economic development of Frisco by bringing goods and people to the city, but it

also was a major source of shipping crops and products out of the city. During that time, most of the cities that survived were on or near a rail line.

### PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

Here we are 107 years later and the topic of rail and our long-term strategic decisions could again help define the future of Frisco. It has been debated by previous city councils and remains an important topic today. The future of a rail system in Frisco needs to be decided in the near

key area of the plan is the expansion of a regional rail system that today covers about 240 miles of existing and developing rail lines by adding another 251 miles of rail. The addition would create a region wide, seamless transportation system.

### RAIL TO FRISCO

The 2030 Mobility Plan has rail coming to Frisco up the current Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) tracks and shows commuter rail, not light rail. Commuter rail is less expensive at \$12-14 million per mile vs. \$40-42 million per mile for light rail. Commuter rail also has fewer stops and does not require an electrical system to power. The Comprehensive Plan shows a station in the Spring Creek/SH 121 area, one at the center of the city near Frisco Square and a northern station near the 380/Dallas North Tollway. The passenger railcars will be powered by a new version of a quieter, more environmentally friendly and operationally efficient diesel engine. The system would be superior to the current diesel engines used on lines like the "T" that runs from Fort Worth to Dallas.

Rail coming to Frisco would make traveling to sporting events and concerts at Pizza Hut Park and other venues easier and less costly. People could ride the train north, get off at the Main Street station and walk to concerts, sporting events, July Fourth celebrations, Heritage Village and the historic downtown area. What better way to visit the Museum of the American Railroad, opening in a few years just south of Heritage Village, than to ride a train? Imagine also being able to take the train to DFW or Love Field or ultimately to Arlington to see a Cowboy's game.

### THE TRAIN RUNS BOTH WAYS

There have been some who express concern about people in Frisco just getting on the train to ride to Dallas for work. These same people are driving to work in Dallas now, and it might add a lot to their quality of life if they were able to get home easier, use their hand-held electronic devices while riding a train (better than while driving) and being able to spend more time with the family. I have lived in Chicago, Atlanta and the Washington D.C. area and rail has not seemed to hamper the growth or economic development of the outlying cities.

In speaking with Bill Bretches, general manager of the Embassy Suites Hotel and Craig Sundell, general manager of the Westin Stonebriar Resort, I learned that both feel rail transportation to Frisco would allow them to hire employees at a point that would keep their cost more in-line with the rest of the area because these employees would have a more viable mode of transportation to get them to work. The same goes for the wide variety of jobs available at Stonebriar Centre and the surrounding retail developments. Steve Lay, general manager of Stonebriar Centre, is in favor of rail as a resource for jobs as well as a way to bring additional shoppers to the mall.

People could ride the train north, get off at the Main Street station and walk to concerts or other events, the Heritage Center and the historic downtown area.

We currently have ten hotels in Frisco with at least three more coming, and the managers talk about how rail will make the trip to Frisco from the airports faster and easier. Meeting planners are constantly looking at proximity to airports and the cost of getting guests to hotels. Cab fares to Frisco are \$55 one-way, plus gratuity. Hotels near rail stations with shuttle pickup have a tremendous advantage when drawing in corporate meetings and conferences. Renting a car at the airport can be expensive; if visitors need a vehicle while in Frisco they could then rent locally, generating more businesses for the area with rental agencies opening additional offices here.

### OPTIONS FOR FUNDING

Obviously, rail coming to Frisco will cost money; the question is how to fund it. For years we investigated if we should become a DART city, but our sales tax dollars go to fund our Economic Development Corporation which brings businesses and jobs to Frisco and to our Community Development Corporation which helps buy

parkland, build parks and develop quality of live venues for our residents. If we gave up the one percent (one cent) of our sales tax required to join DART, we lose the above entities. We have looked at funding a rail system by reducing by possibly one-eighth of a cent the tax money currently earmarked for the EDC and CDC, but that is a longer-term plan that requires a gradual reduction while still maintaining both corporations' funding needs. In 2007, 106 different groups, comprised of cities, counties and transit organizations all passed the same resolution to increase sales tax by one-half percent to one percent in order to help fund rail and to allow those cities already in DART to use the tax increase for economic development.

The bill passed in the state senate and never got to a vote in the House. The frustration of all of us who worked on this bill was that there was no alternate solution presented by the Legislature, only that our plan was not acceptable. This year there is a transportation bill called the Texas Local Option Transportation Act (TLOTA) being considered by the senate and the house in Austin. This bill passed the senate 23-8 and now goes to the House. While some observers view the bill as adding tax programs, others see it as the possibility of using six different means of funding to help pay for rail or other transportation options. In any event, this plan would provide for a local-option election allowing citizens to vote on using the funds for rail or the other alternative transportation options. I hope that this plan will be approved so that, at least our citizens would decide how we might fund rail. Making no decision is the worst option. We must plan for the future and find ways to build a seamless rail system. We can never build enough roads to relieve the congestion, air quality and cost of driving. We must have alternative means of transportation. The DFW area already has the fourth worst congestion behind Los Angeles, New York and Chicago. Regional rail provides a solution.

Mike Simpson is a former Frisco mayor and regular contributor to Frisco STYLE Magazine.

