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By **MICHAEL A. LINDENBERGER**

Transportation Writer

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Dallas Area Rapid Transit's new Green Line rail service is drawing fewer riders than agency officials had hoped when it opened to enormous fanfare 6 1/2 months ago.

At the time, DART said it expected an average of about 12,200 passengers per weekday to use the 20 new stations during the line's first year.

But halfway into the year, a little more than half that many — 7,200 daily — use those stations. Only four of the 20 have drawn more riders than DART projected.

DART officials said it's early yet.

"We're really happy with the Green Line," said Todd Plesko, vice president for planning and development. "The Green Line will absolutely increase as it becomes a more mature system."

But DART's track record for projections is a bad one. Year after year, it has had to scale back projections of rail ridership, sometimes drastically, as passenger counts routinely come in below expectations.

The faulty projections, however, are just one part of a much bigger problem for DART. A Dallas Morning News review of passenger data from the past 15 years shows that despite massive promotion and billions in tax dollars spent, most of DART's rail stations serve fewer people now than when they opened.

Thirty-four DART light-rail stations opened between 1996 and 2002, and most serve fewer riders today than they did in January 2003. Ridership has fallen both in the aggregate and at 19 of the 34 individual stations.

With only a couple of exceptions, the gains at the 15 other stations have been modest at best.

The numbers show that the only way DART has been able to increase ridership has been by adding service where none existed.

That widely touted expansion is almost over. The Orange Line, under construction to Irving, will probably be the last major light-rail addition for at least a decade.

Plesko said that as the construction boom slows, DART will have to become more service-oriented, improving the system it has and relying less on new service to add riders.

The transition will be difficult, given the agency's financial pressures, he said.

“There are many people, and I am one of them, who believe transit is a 50- to 100-year investment,” Plesko said. “We’re not giving up just because things aren’t where we hoped they’d be in 2011. We’re still building the network.”

Lower expectations

Meanwhile, DART needs to get a better handle on how many people will actually use its trains, said Chief Financial Officer David Leininger.

Its record at doing so has been terrible, though it has gotten a little better each year.

Every year as part of its budgeting process, DART projects its finances — based on factors including ridership — for 20 years. In 2007, DART budget writers predicted that by 2012, the Green, Blue and Red lines would combine to provide 45 million passenger trips per year.

Last week, Leininger told the agency’s board that he’d be pleased with half that many.

“We recognized a couple of years ago that our ridership models looked like they were consistently overstating our actual ridership,” Leininger said.

As a result, DART has lowered its rail expectations for each of the last several years, only to find that performance trailed even the more pessimistic numbers.

As recently as last fall, DART projected that by 2012 the light-rail system would provide 26.7 million passenger trips, down nearly 20 million from the 2007 projections. But Leininger said Tuesday that a safer bet would be 23.5 million.

“We need to make another downward adjustment,” he told the board.

Negative factors

But accurate predictions won’t reverse the disappointing ridership trends.

Officials said last week that DART faces a series of tough problems in increasing ridership.

The recession has meant it has less sales tax revenue to spend. That has prompted the agency to cut bus service 6 percent and also to reduce rail trips, causing longer waits and more crowding on trains.

Fewer riders has meant less fare revenue, even as DART has had to contend with forces well beyond its control, including slow population growth in its member cities and the fact that fewer jobs are located near its older stations.

Plesko said only 256,000 people work within a half-mile of a DART rail station, and 51 percent of the jobs belong to people from nonmember cities. That puts a greater burden on DART’s buses to link rail stations to workplaces, even as the agency is cutting bus service to make ends meet.

Those factors help explain why DART has been able to increase ridership only by building stations, instead of attracting more riders to the ones it has.

DART now operates 54 stations and in April provided rides for an average of 33,750 passengers per weekday. In April 1997, DART’s first 17 stations served about 10,200 riders per weekday.

An analysis of station-to-station data dating to 1996 reveals just how slow North Texans have been to adopt mass transit.

At most of DART's initial 17 stations, ridership is less today than it was in the first year. And that's also true across the system as it doubled to 34 stations by 2002.

At Union Station, one of DART's oldest stations, an average of about 875 people used light rail per workday in April. That's only about 50 more than in April 1998 — and well below half the number at the peak in 2002.

In the north, the Red Line's Lovers Lane Station had been open just three months in April 1997. Trains there were providing 1,200 trips daily to about 550 passengers. Fourteen years later, the station provided 1,066 trips in April 2011.

Where to get money?

DART officials make clear that addressing these challenges will take more money, but from where?

Plesko said the region must find a way to pass on some of the cost of transit to nonmember cities.

“There needs to be a broad-based revenue source, like the gas tax provides for our region's highways, so that we have a broader market to help support the region's transit systems,” he said.

But in the short term, Leininger told board members, the agency will need to raise fares again in 2012.

That worries board member Scott Carlson of Dallas.

“If we are going to raise fares, what is it going to do to our ridership?” Carlson asked Tuesday. “It's almost like we are in a downward spiral. We raise the fares, and the ridership goes down. I think we need to be in the business of increasing ridership.”