



# T MASTER PLAN 2015



## STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

To determine how stakeholders view The T and identify major transit issues that should be addressed as part of this study, members of the Nelson\Nygaard team conducted a series of stakeholder interviews and focus group discussions. These conversations were held with members of the community identified by the North Central Texas Council of Governments (NCTCOG) and the Fort Worth Transportation Authority (The T) as having a stake or interest in the development of public transportation in the greater Fort Worth region. This report presents the input received via these stakeholder interviews and focus groups.

## METHODOLOGY

NCTCOG and The T identified the specific organizations and individuals most appropriate for participation in the interview process. These individuals and organizations, all of whom have a significant interest in The T and its services, were selected to represent a cross-section of T member and nonmember communities, major employers, institutions, local business leaders, and social service agencies. A total of 15 stakeholder interviews and four focus groups were conducted in January and February 2015. A complete list of the organizations that participated is included below.

NCTCOG and The T staff also contacted the organizations and individuals to confirm their willingness to participate in the process. This step helped to encourage participation in the process and also ensured the stakeholder list contained the most appropriate individuals for an interview within an organization. After NCTCOG gave the study team the final list of stakeholders, staff from Nelson\Nygaard contacted each organization to arrange a meeting, and Nelson\Nygaard staff conducted the actual interviews.

NCTCOG and The T were primarily responsible for organizing the four focus group discussions. NCTCOG and The T staff identified the appropriate organizations for participation and invited representatives to the focus groups. Nelson\Nygaard staff facilitated each focus group discussion.

All interview and focus group participants were asked to provide candid opinions and input regarding The T's services and their opinions on transit in Fort Worth, and were assured that their responses would not be individually attributed. For this reason, this report presents the comments that the stakeholder interviewees and focus group members provided, but does not attribute them to specific individuals.

## TOPICS

The discussions centered on a series of topics, which were open-ended and intended to start a free flowing conversation on regional transit needs and challenges. The topics included:

- 1 What is your/your organization's interest/involvement in transit service?
- 2 What do you consider to be the greatest transit issues/challenges for your employees, customers, clients, organization, etc.?
- 3 What services provided by The T do you consider to be the most effective, and why?
- 4 What services provided by The T do you consider to be the least effective, and why?



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- 5 What do you consider to be the greatest transit issues/challenges for the Western side of the Fort Worth/Dallas Metroplex?
- 6 Are there new types of services that you believe should be examined?
- 7 Are there particular geographic areas where transit needs to be improved?
- 8 What should be major considerations when improving transit (for example, cost-effectiveness, ridership increases, provide basic level of service, social equity, traffic reduction, economic development, etc.)?
- 9 Expanding transit service would require additional funding; would you support a dedicated funding source for transit?

Many stakeholders had more interest in some topics than others, and stakeholders were encouraged to focus on the topic that they were most interested in and/or were most familiar with.

## STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWEES AND FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Stakeholder interviews were held with representatives of 15 private and governmental organizations and four focus groups were held with 15 participants:

### Stakeholder Interviews

- City of Arlington, Councilmember Kathryn Wilemon
- City of Fort Worth, David Cooke, City Manager
- City of Richland Hills, Eric Strong, City Manager
- City of Grapevine, Bruno Rumbelow, City Manager
- Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport, Khaled Naja, EVP, Airport Planning and Development
- Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport, Jim Crites, EVP, Operations
- Fort Worth Convention and Visitors Bureau, Robert Jameson, President/CEO
- Hillwood, Russell Laughlin, Senior Vice President
- Johnson County, Judge Roger Harmon
- Parker County, Judge Mark Riley
- Sundance Square, Johnny Campbell, President/CEO
- Tarrant County, Judge Glen Whitley
- Tarrant Regional Transportation Coalition, Gary Fickes, Chairman
- Texas Christian University, Steve McGee, Chief of Police
- Texas Wesleyan University, Frederick Slabach, President

### Focus Group #1: Social Service Providers

- Senior Citizen Services of Greater Tarrant County, Marcus Rockwell and Jerry Mosman
- MHMR Tarrant County, Susan Garnett
- Fort Worth Housing Authority, Naomi Byrne



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### Focus Group #2: Business Interests

- FWSI, Mike Brennan and Paul Paine
- Fort Worth Chamber of Commerce, Bill Thornton
- TRVA, JD Granger
- Workforce Solutions of Tarrant County, Kay Gollihugh

### Focus Group #3: FWTA Employees

- Curvie Hawkins
- Richard Maxwell
- Rob Harmon
- Angela Allen
- Nancy Amos
- Phil Dupler
- Sandip Sen
- Jose Perez
- Vani Chitiprolu
- Becky Thornton
- Monica Fowler
- Carla Forman
- Albino Sanchez
- Gian Carlo Vendel
- JD Smith
- Melanie Kroeker

### Focus Group #4: Transportation Providers

- DCTA, Jim Cline, Charles Emery, Kristina Brevard
- City of Cleburne, Grady Easdon
- City of Fort Worth, Fernando Costa
- City of Richland Hills, Jason Moore
- Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport, Greg Royster
- Fort Worth Bike Share, Kristen Camareno
- TXDOT, Curtis Hanan



## 2. SUMMARY OF RESULTS

### KEY THEMES

Not surprisingly, stakeholder interviews and focus group participants have a wide range of view on The T's services and major transit issues. Still, a number of major themes emerged:

**IMAGE:** The T is viewed widely as a transit system that provides service for the poor and disabled, and not for others.

**SERVICE:** Service is viewed as complicated with very infrequent service (one hour headways were often mentioned), and with not enough evening and weekend service. People need more flexibility than The T provides.

**MANAGEMENT:** The recent Board and senior management changes have been viewed positively, with The T becoming more focused and more financially responsible (with the discontinuation of free passes to social service agencies seen as an example of this), and working better with the community.

**PUBLIC INFORMATION:** As things now stand, there is too much uncertainty involved in riding the bus: where does it go, has it already left the stop or is it late, how do I pay my fare, etc. Better public information is needed to make riding the bus easier and more convenient, and with less uncertainty.

**MOST EFFECTIVE SERVICES:** Among most of the stakeholders, there is a very high interest in rail, with the most effective services often considered to be high-speed rail (although not a T project), TRE, and TEX Rail. Among bus services, Molly the Trolley, was widely viewed as the most successful—simple, recognizable, and free—and without the negative image of other The T bus services. The SPUR is only vaguely known.

**LEAST EFFECTIVE SERVICES:** The T's bus services, in general, are not considered to be very effective, with major issues being that:

- Service is too complicated.
- Service is too infrequent,
- There is not enough evening and weekend service.
- There isn't any service to many areas.
- Available information isn't good enough.

**GREATEST CHALLENGES:** The greatest challenges are:

**Lack of Desire for Bus Service:** Many communities perceive little or no demand for bus service, and in some areas, there is opposition to bus service.

**Very Limited Membership in FWTA:** It was frequently mentioned that only three out of 41 communities are full members of FWTA. This was mentioned in a number of contexts, including as a barrier to better and more extensive service, and as an example of the lack of demand for more transit.



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**Challenges in Attracting New Members:** To become full members, communities need to levy a 1/2 cent sales tax. However, most cities are at their sales tax cap and no longer have the ability to do so. There will need to be new ways for communities to join, either as partial members or through another source of funds. New communities will also need a policy voice commensurate with their contributions.

**Funding:** One-half cent sales tax is not enough, and additional funding will be needed. Many mentioned the State Legislature’s disapproval of local option sales taxes as a major barrier.<sup>1</sup>

**Developing a Strategy:** Significant investment will be required to build a robust transit system, and what would be a way to “stair step” to the future?

*Editorial Comment. The overall understanding of the role of transit, and how it can be provided, is weak. Many view rail as attractive for most people, but don’t understand it well (for example, often confusing TRE and TEX Rail with light rail), but bus service as desirable only to poor people, and thus not needed in their communities.*

**DESIRED TYPES OF SERVICES:** The stakeholder interviewees mentioned a large number of desirable services, although there were no overwhelming “winners.” Those that received a significant amount of support included:

- Service that is simple, frequent, operates longer, and that is easy to get information about.
- High-speed rail, with connections beyond the Metroplex area.
- Commuter rail.
- More “Molly the Trolley-type” services.
- Bus Rapid Transit (BRT).
- Major routes with frequent service.
- Commuter express/park and ride services.
- Special event service to Arlington.

**SERVICE TO NEW LOCATIONS:** The interviewees described a large number of locations for either new or improved service. Those that received the most attention included:

- Major corridors in Fort Worth: between downtown and West 7th, northern Fort Worth (especially with planned development), New South End, and the Medical District
- Arlington, although most discussion focused on special events and for UTA students rather than for residents and employees.
- Alliance, although largely as a future need rather than current need.

**MAJOR CONSIDERATIONS IN EXPANDING TRANSIT:** Most stakeholders had fewer opinions on which considerations would be most important when examining whether to expand transit. However, those most frequently mentioned included:

- Ridership
- Cost-effectiveness
- Congestion relief
- How to balance the needs of different people

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<sup>1</sup> Cities vote for and contribute sales tax revenue for transit service; however, some stakeholders referred to the sales taxes as being generated at the county level (e.g., “1/2-cent sales tax in Tarrant County”), indicating a perception that these differences exist at the county level. In addition, although sales taxes were specifically mentioned most often by stakeholders, the goal was the option for a variety of local tax options.





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**FUNDING:** Those interviewed universally viewed transit funding as a major hurdle that will need to be overcome, and one that at this time has no clear solutions. Options discussed included:

**Local Option Sales Tax:** Most interviewees were familiar with unsuccessful efforts to get the State Legislature to allow them to enact a local sales tax option subject to voter approval. While many were pessimistic of the prospects for a similar measure in the future, most thought that it should still be considered. One interviewee also suggested that individual towns should also be allowed to opt-in or opt-out.

**Countywide Transit Bond Bill:** Similar to bond bills for road projects, Tarrant County could, subject to voter approval, issue bonds for transit projects that would be repaid via property tax levies.

**Gas Tax:** Now that gasoline prices are down, could a gas tax be an option?

**“Rainy Day Fund”/Severance Tax:** These funds are now all used for road projects; could some also be used for transit?

**Sales Tax on Automobiles:** The State Legislature is now considering the use of sales tax revenues for automobiles that are over \$3 billion per year for road projects; could some also be used for transit?

A number of interviewees also advocated further investigation of leveraging of private funds, primarily through transit-oriented development.

## SUMMARY OF RESULTS BY TOPIC

By topic, common topics and views were:

### 1. What is your/your organization’s interest/involvement in transit service?

- Most respondents are concerned with improving regional connectivity, and discussed and questioned how transit can improve mobility around Tarrant County and the Fort Worth region. People travel to, from, and across Tarrant County, and there is a need for better connections to employment and major activity centers in the region.
- There is a need for transportation options in the face of increasing growth and vehicle congestion. Transit can provide an efficient travel option if service is better: improved service would make transit more attractive to people, and would be especially useful during peak travel periods.

### 2. What do you consider to be the greatest transit issues/challenges for your employees, customers, clients, organization, etc.?

- Existing service is inadequate to draw people who are interested in using it. Low headways, lack of coverage, and long travel times dissuade many potential users, who want more flexibility from their travel options.
- There is a stigma about using transit, with negative perceptions about who takes it and how useful it is. Among people who are less familiar with transit, there is also a lot of uncertainty around how to use the bus and understanding how to make a trip by transit.
- The current system does not provide enough regional connections for people to reach employment or major destinations outside of downtown Fort Worth and across Tarrant County.
- Member and non-member communities are concerned about representation, and want assurance that they would have a voice in decision making. They want to make sure that they get something for the money they put in.



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### 3. What services provided by The T do you consider to be the most effective, and why?

- Many respondents pointed to the TRE commuter rail and Molly the Trolley as successful services provided by the T. There is a very high interest in rail, with the most effective services often considered to be high-speed rail (although not a T project), TRE, and TEX Rail. Some noted that they had heard good feedback from those who use TRE, and that it appeals people who might not otherwise consider taking transit. Among bus services, Molly the Trolley, was widely viewed as the most successful, and as simple, recognizable, and free, and without the negative image of other The T bus services. The SPUR is only vaguely known, although the service was praised when it was mentioned. Metro Arlington Express, or MAX, was also noted for being a successful service, as well as an important project for stakeholders.
- Respondents provided positive feedback about MITS service, as well as for the free and reduced passes it provides to older adults, people with disabilities, and students. Feedback also highlighted The T's special event shuttles, such as the Downtown Fort Worth-to-AT&T Stadium service, which respondents said works well and "provides real value and benefits". The T was also praised for its drivers and for the agency's customer service, and for being able to address and resolve issues that arise.

### 4. What services provided by The T do you consider to be the least effective, and why?

- The T's bus services, in general, are not considered to be very effective, with major issues being service that is too complicated and too infrequent, not enough evening and weekend service, no service to many areas, long travel times, and poor information. Respondents believe that this makes it difficult to attract discretionary riders, and respondents noted that dependent riders are not necessarily well served. Respondents frequently noted that the bus system is complicated and difficult to understand, citing that it is not "user friendly".
  - Additional concerns identified include:
  - Poor information about service and programs, such as the Guaranteed Ride Home program
  - Service does not capture discretionary riders; car owners have no reason or incentive to use transit
  - The T is "too good" of a public citizen by giving free passes; giving away service is not its job
  - Operating service for "political reasons", rather than based on demand for service

### 5. What do you consider to be the greatest transit issues/challenges for the Western side of the Fort Worth/Dallas Metroplex?

- Respondents overwhelmingly expressed a need for a system that works regionally and connects destinations and cities across Tarrant County. The T operates "patchwork" service, and does not really operate or "think regionally" as a system. A major challenge facing regional transit service is the region's development patterns, with most growth occurring on the periphery of the region and sprawl being the prevailing pattern of development. There is a lot of ground for The T to cover, and the low-density, spread-out development in much of the area can be difficult to effectively serve with transit. Transit service currently tends to follow development, but the two should be coordinated together in a deliberate way; more emphasis is needed on the connection between transit and land use in the Fort Worth region.
- Another major barrier to more regional connection is that very few communities in Tarrant County/the Fort Worth region are members of The T; it was frequently mentioned that only three out of 41 communities are full members. Transit service is not attractive to many non-member communities, and this poses a barrier to providing service that connects the region and meets demand. There is not overwhelming support for transit from a large cross-section of the community, and there is less political support. The T needs to build political support to empower the agency.



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- Lack of funding is “one of The T’s biggest challenges.” The T is chronically underfunded, but there is a need for more and reliable funding if the community is going to invest in a strong transit system. A ½ cent sales tax is probably too low, and most communities use their sales taxes for other purposes.
- There is a prevailing stigma attached to public transportation, and respondents believe that there is a large brand challenge to overcome for The T. Bus service is perceived to be only for low-income people, and a transportation option of last resort rather than an attractive choice. Respondents believe that existing service is oriented too much around the transit dependent market, and that the quality and convenience of service needs to be improved to attract discretionary riders.

### 6. Are there new types of services that you believe should be examined?

- Most respondents stated that service should be frequent, fast, and direct, making transit attractive enough for people to become “invested” in supporting the system. Better information about services and access to information were also requested.
- The desired services with the most support included rail service (including expanded commuter rail and high-speed rail), bus rapid transit (BRT), and expanded commuter bus/park-and-ride service. Several respondents noted the importance of having dedicated facilities for transit, such as dedicated bus lanes, and how features of BRT could help transit offer an advantage over sitting in traffic.
- There were also requests for more “Molly the Trolley-type service”, or circulators that would provide direct, convenient connections between local destinations for residents and visitors. Additional suggestions included major routes or corridors with frequent service, and special event service to Arlington.

### 7. Are there particular geographic areas where transit needs to be improved?

- Respondents identified several locations where they would like either new or improved service. Those that received the most attention included:
  - Major corridors in Fort Worth: between downtown and West 7th, northern Fort Worth (especially with planned development), New South End, Medical District
  - Arlington, especially service that is focused on special events and for UTA students rather than for residents and employees
  - Alliance
- Other popular responses included:
  - Lamar/Collins (Arlington)
  - TCU
  - I-35 corridor north of Fort Worth
  - Burleson
  - DFW Airport
  - Viridian (new development in Arlington)
  - Walsh Ranch (West Tarrant County)
  - I-20 west of Fort Worth
  - Haltom City
  - West and southwest areas of Fort Worth
  - Southwest portion of Fort Worth & Tarrant County



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8. What should be major considerations when improving transit (for example, cost-effectiveness, ridership increases, provide basic level of service, social equity, traffic reduction, economic development, etc.)?
- Cost effectiveness was one of the most frequently mentioned factors that should be considered when improving service, and the majority of respondents expressed a preference for ensuring the cost-effectiveness of the system over providing equitable service to participating communities. Most respondents called for service to be based on demand for service, and to prioritize meeting existing demand for transit over serving low-demand areas. Respondents urged that transit should be focused on meeting the need and demand for service, rather than operating routes for political or funding equity reasons, or planning service as an economic development tool. At the same time, other respondents called for funding equity to play a role in service provision, asking that communities who contribute resources should be assured of getting something for their money.
  - The T needs to provide higher-quality, more attractive service. Reliability of service is crucial, and service needs to run at higher frequencies and during later hours in the evening to offer more convenience and flexibility for riders and potential riders. When asked to choose between more frequent service and longer service hours, respondents overwhelmingly opted for higher service frequency.
  - Transit needs to be considered as part of the region's future, and service should be planned in tandem with regional planning for the Fort Worth region. Rather than following development or being an "afterthought", transit should be more closely coordinated with development as part of the region's growth strategy. Focus group participants generally urged a more regional approach to transit planning rather than prioritizing local control.
9. Expanding transit service would require additional funding; would you support a dedicated funding source for transit?
- Respondents universally viewed transit funding as a major hurdle that will need to be overcome, and one that at this time has no clear solutions. In general, respondents expressed support for more and dedicated funding for transit, although it was acknowledged that identifying a source of dedicated, sustainable funding is a major challenge. Options discussed included:
    - Local Option Tax: Most interviewees were familiar with unsuccessful efforts to get the State Legislature to allow communities to enact a local tax option subject to voter approval. While many were pessimistic of the prospects for a similar measure in the future, most thought that it should still be considered. One interviewee also suggested that individual towns should also be allowed to opt-in or opt-out.
    - Countywide Transit Bond Bill: Similar to bond bills for road projects, Tarrant County could, subject to voter approval, issue bonds for transit projects that would be repaid via property tax levies.
    - Gas Tax: Now that gasoline prices are down, could a gas tax be an option?
    - "Rainy Day Fund"/Severance Tax: These funds are now all used for road projects; could some also be used for transit?
    - Sales Tax on Automobiles: The State Legislature is now considering the use of sales tax revenues for automobiles that are over \$3 billion per year for road projects; could some also be used for transit?
  - Respondents also advocated further investigating the leveraging of private funds, primarily through transit-oriented development. Some suggested that development fees could be used to direct development to the more transit-supportive core of the region.
    - Respondents expressed a need to make service – and the organization/funding mechanism – more regional, and to find ways to bring in non-member communities.



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## PRIORITIES

Focus group participants were asked the level of emphasis that should be placed on a number of competing priorities, with the average results from the four focus groups shown below in terms of percentage weights.

<b>IMPROVE VS EXPAND</b>	59%	<i>Improve existing services</i>	↔	<i>Expand to new areas</i>	41%
<b>COVERAGE</b>	24%	<i>Provide service in areas where demand is low</i>	↔	<i>Provide more service where demand is high</i>	76%
<b>FREQUENCY &amp; SPAN</b>	62%	<i>More frequent service for a shorter time</i>	↔	<i>Less frequent service but for a longer time</i>	38%
<b>DAYS OF SERVICE</b>	49%	<i>Less weekday service; more weekend service</i>	↔	<i>More weekday service; less weekend service</i>	51%
<b>EQUITY VS COST</b>	46%	<i>Emphasize equity</i>	↔	<i>Emphasize cost-effectiveness</i>	54%
<b>AMBITION</b>	71%	<i>More ambitious plan/ higher cost</i>	↔	<i>Lower cost/ less ambitious plan</i>	29%
<b>LOCAL VS REGIONAL</b>	45%	<i>Emphasize local control and concerns</i>	↔	<i>Emphasize regional approach</i>	55%

Results from the individual focus groups, which are presented in Appendix B, varied among groups. However, in total, the level of agreement among the different groups was greater than the differences.