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Former Charlotte, N.C., mayor tells North Texans of benefits of trolleys

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BY GORDON DICKSON

gdickson@star-telegram.com

FORT WORTH — Returning trolleys to a city's streets can revitalize other aging and underused forms of transit such as buses, a former Charlotte, N.C., mayor is telling Fort Worth leaders.

"Before the rail system was built, the bus system was decaying," Patrick McCrory said, describing his own city's experience, during a recent seminar, Tracks to the Future, at the Sheraton Fort Worth Hotel. "It was embarrassing. The only people who rode it were people who had to, and I felt sorry for them. We treated them terribly. They had no bathrooms."

His message resonated with transit supporters in Tarrant County, where the Fort Worth Transportation Authority has been criticized for not expanding its bus ridership beyond the mostly low-income residents, seniors and people with disabilities who have no other options.

McCrory is credited with pushing through a transportation plan that, with the help of a \$200 million federal grant for light rail, revitalized blighted Charlotte neighborhoods. On Friday, he visited with about 200 advocates of returning electric trolleys to the Fort Worth streets.

Now that light rail is on the ground in Charlotte, he said, "our bus ridership is not just people who have to have it but people who want to ride it. Bus ridership is all races and classes. The bus system is unbelievable now."

The T has avoided cutting bus service despite a drop in sales tax revenues, T board Chairman Robert Parmelee told the crowd.

"We have a robust system that is modern, safe and runs on time," he said.

Competing projects

Although McCrory didn't speak specifically about T services, he did address the importance of local agencies working together.

In Fort Worth, two major transit-oriented projects are under way.

A proposed \$500 million commuter rail line would run from southwest Fort Worth to Grapevine and the north entrance to Dallas/Fort Worth Airport. The T expects to apply for federal new-starts transit funding for up to \$250 million.

The proposal to bring streetcars back to Fort Worth would cost an estimated \$250 million initially, but only \$2 million in planning funds has been secured.

The Regional Transportation Council has applied for \$33 million in federal stimulus money for the proposed streetcar system. The first phase would include bringing back electrified streetcars to downtown Fort Worth and running lines along West Seventh Street to the west side and to the medical district on the south side, Councilman Joel Burns said.

Streetcar service to the north and east sides would be added later, Burns said.

Fort Worth also plans to request \$25 million in new urban circulator funds for its proposed streetcars. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood announced this month that \$280 million would be set aside for nationwide streetcars and similar programs.

'The pain isn't here yet'

At Friday's presentation, McCrory addressed the whole audience, then hosted panel discussions of what has been and can be done to expand public transportation in North Texas.

Many leaders from Fort Worth, Dallas and Denton described for McCrory their five-year effort — so far in vain — to persuade state officials to provide new sources of revenue to expand transit. They said their 20-year goal is to fully integrate the T, Dallas Area Rapid Transit and the Denton County Transportation Authority.

It's an uphill battle convincing skeptics that the region's transportation grid — particularly its highways — will become impassable if money to improve roads, bridges and rail lines isn't found quickly, said Michael Morris, transportation director for the North Central Texas Council of Governments. Some leaders have become "a little comfortable" that the region, with a population of more than 6 million, can continue to handle growth without new transportation initiatives — though population and congestion forecasters know that the situation could quickly become grim, he said.

McCrory said he endured political obstacles in North Carolina but won support for a half-cent sales tax. He said fixing transportation is like treating an illness before there are symptoms.

"You can wait until the pain arrives and do it then, but you've probably waited too long and it'll probably cost too much and won't work," McCrory said. "Or you can do it now, and it's probably going to be cheaper, probably work, probably be more efficient, but it's going to take one hell of a sell because the pain isn't here yet. That's why you are in a race right now."

Tips for success

Former Charlotte, N.C., Mayor Patrick McCrory's tips for winning support for transit:

- Listen to the experts when deciding where to build rail lines. "I wanted to go to the airport first, but the experts said the airport is in fifth place," McCrory said.
- Calculate tax revenues that transit-oriented development will generate for state government and show those figures to lawmakers. Also, specify how many jobs will be created. "Show them in pictures," McCrory said. "Don't bring them a book of 400 pages, like planners do."
- Don't use words such as *density*, which turn voters off. Instead, use words that paint a picture. McCrory said the title of his presentation — "Mayberry to Metropolis" — conveys the message that transit can help people accomplish the nearly universally understood American goal of living in a safe neighborhood while commuting to a good-paying job in the city.
- Never stop communicating your message, and don't take opposition lightly. McCrory was caught off guard by an effort to repeal a half-cent sales tax for transit in Charlotte, although the repeal failed.
- Don't exaggerate economic development numbers. Federal officials who review funding applications will catch the inaccuracies.

GORDON DICKSON, 817-390-7796

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