

Trolley

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town. DART plans to offer more bus service instead.

Among those looking to the McKinney Avenue Trolley to fill the void are the Central Dallas Association, the West End Association and City Hall.

Said City Councilman Chris Luna, who represents downtown: "I'm not mad at DART. But I think we need to keep our minds open."

Through the North Central Texas Council of Governments, the trolley supporters have commissioned a study of potential routes and sources of funding to reach downtown. Results of the study are expected next spring.

While the idea of extending the three-mile trolley is not new, this is the first time that so many organizations have supported the little streetcar operation as a potential competitor to DART.

Michael Morris, director of transportation for the Council of Governments, said DART officials "dropped the ball" when they elected to stick with conventional buses downtown rather than embrace the trolley.

Morris said the trolley could become a significant force in mass transit by tapping into downtown ridership.

"We're picking up the ball," he said. "We think we can really make the trolley a more effective transportation mode by penetrating downtown."

Founded in 1989 by a group of McKinney Avenue merchants, the trolley is a popular neighborhood novelty. Confronted by funding problems, it nearly shut down two years ago.

Phil Cobb, chairman of the McKinney Avenue Transit Authority, said he blames political pressure from the suburbs for DART's decision to snub the trolley's expansion.

"It was a tug-of-war for funds," he said. "And politically we lost."

Estimates on the cost of extending the trolley range from less than \$5 million to more than \$20 million.

The Council of Governments sought proposals earlier this summer from consultants interested in conducting the new study. The study will include not only potential funding sources for the expansion, but also analysis of traffic congestion issues and methods for the trolley to "interface" with DART.

The estimated \$100,000 study is being paid for by the Council of Governments, a regional planning agency based in Arlington.

Cobb expressed excitement that the trolley's efforts to expand without DART's support have won the backing of what he called a "pretty powerful alliance."

He also said initial meetings with the Federal Transit Administration have left him optimistic that the project will qualify for federal support. Although DART already is spending millions in public funds on mass transit, Cobb said taxpayers probably would not object to subsidizing the trolley, too.

"If taxpayers had to pull the lever between us and DART," he added, "I think we'd win."

DART, founded nine years ago, receives local and federal funding to build mass transit systems extending from downtown to the suburbs.

For the downtown circulator, the agency considered streetcars among several possible technologies. The decision was made to offer a "rubber tire" circulator — buses.

Tom Ryden, a DART operations planning manager, said conventional bus service was chosen because it is less expensive and allows more flexibility in operations.

Besides, DART officials view the trol-



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ley primarily as a form of entertainment, serving a different market than DART. If it does become a competitor downtown, Ryden said, bus service simply would be curtailed.

"That's the beauty of a flexible system," he said. "There's no need for us to compete with each other."

City Hall is encouraging both the expansion of the trolley system and DART's decision not to make such a sizeable investment.

Bonnie Meeder, regional mobility coordinator for the city, said she hopes Cobb and his supporters can reach downtown and attract conventioners and other visitors to the trolley.

At the same time, Meeder said, DART's position that downtown is not active enough to warrant a special rail system seems sensible.

"Why do an expensive system when a less-expensive system will serve just as well?" she said.

DART management this week outlined several planned improvements in the Hop-A-Bus system, scheduled to take effect in November.

Downtown business leaders say they want more.

Miguel DelValle of the Central Dallas Association said his organization is disappointed that DART has not incorporated the McKinney Avenue Trolley into its plans.

DelValle said DART seems to be encircling downtown without penetrating it.

"We need to cut through the core — not go around it," he said.

Betheny Reid of the West End Association said her group of merchants in the popular entertainment district is seeking "the next evolution" of DART's bus system.

West End leaders have been mulling options with City Hall officials and others for several months. Extending the McKinney Avenue Trolley, Reid said, could end up being financed partly with public funds and partly with private funds.

"Our folks here are very entrepreneurial," she said. "We're just trying to find out what our work scope is."