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Many take free ride on new city trolley

By TONY HARTZEL

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The oldest operating rail line in Dallas has found a new following.

A recent expansion and a permanent switch to free rides drew about 11,000 riders last month to the "M Line," better known as the McKinney Avenue Transit Authority. Just a few months ago, trolley cars attracted one-fifth the current number of passengers.

Free rides are a major reason for the newfound popularity, but a direct link to DART's Cityplace light-rail station also helped the streetcar system's resurgence. The extension officially opened in May.

"People are using light rail to connect to the streetcars," said Ron Kovatis, executive director of the trolley agency. "If our service can expand, it will be even more successful."

Like those who use light rail, trolley riders have incorporated transit into their daily lives, a recent survey shows. A one-day survey of 96 riders in September shows that a majority of users take the trolley to work or school. About 16 percent use it to get to shopping, entertainment or business meetings.

"It's what makes this a neighborhood instead of just a place to live," said John Landrum, the agency's chief operating officer.

Trolleys ran in Dallas in the early part of the 20th century but were scrapped as the automobile became more popular. In 1989, streetcars named Petunia, Rosie, Matilda and Green Dragon returned transit service along restored tracks in Dallas' Uptown area. DART's light-rail system opened seven years later.

For years, the trolley company served a more limited clientele. This year, the Downtown Improvement District and Dallas Area Rapid Transit started lending the agency their support. That help, along with the longtime support of the Uptown

Improvement District, has led to new trolley system expansion plans.

Contracts could be signed next summer for an eight-tenths mile, \$4.6 million extension into the heart of downtown's growing Arts District. The trolleys would run in a loop and stop a block from DART's rail system at the St. Paul station.

Work should begin in the fall on a turntable at the Cityplace station. Once complete, it will allow trolley cars to turn around on a rotating platform a device needed to expand the agency's fleet.

All of the McKinney Avenue Transit Authority's streetcars have operating controls at both ends, allowing them to run back and forth on a straight rail line. The agency also has some cars in storage that have controls at only one end, a design that requires them to be turned around when they reach the end of the line.

Expansion plans call for a large streetcar network in the heart of downtown. One line would connect to the West End Historic District, and another line would run along Main Street or a parallel road.

Add a second light-rail route through the Central Business District in the next decade, and downtown could become a hotbed of transit activity.

Light rail and streetcars are "two totally different systems. Streetcars and a second light-rail alignment can be complimentary. They serve different purposes and different populations," Mr. Kovatis said.

In the interim, the trolley agency, its sponsors and DART have created a free trolley bus route that has been slow to attract riders. The route connects the West End, Arts District and Main Street shops, but it has only one bus that runs on a 15- to 20-minute frequency.

Tony Hartzel can be reached at P.O. Box 655237, Dallas, TX 75265.

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