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IN MY OPINION

## MASS TRANSIT BILL'S TIMING IS CRUCIAL



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**Most local cities passed on funding mass transit before, so more aggressive steps are needed now.**

If your kid maxes out a credit card, you don't just hand him a new one. But co-sign his college loan? That's another matter, because the investment and timing are so important, and the payoff can be huge.

Take a similar view of the regional transit bill passed by the state Senate last week, and it's easier to accept.

It pains me to see local governments connive new ways to raise taxes, especially after they tapped out their existing sources, often for dubious purposes. But it's more important, by far, to get rolling on a regional rail solution for North Texas — even if a 6-cent increase in the gas tax is the best we can do.

Our clogged roads and polluted air cry out for a major push on a commuter rail. And if a transit bill doesn't get through the current Legislature, we'll have to draft a new long-range mobility plan that would put North Texas even further behind the curve.

Not a good place to be with the area's population projected to add 3 million residents in the next two decades.

"We're the fastest-growing region in the United States, and we should be worried about how we're going to sustain it," said Michael Morris, transportation director for the North Central Texas Council of Governments, the umbrella agency coordinating the transit plan.

This feels like the federal debate over bailing out big banks and giant insurer AIG. Nobody wanted to reward business failure (remember moral hazard?), but keeping the economy afloat was a much higher priority.

Instead of loose lending and over-the-top executive pay, the trouble with transit funding is that too many local cities opted to spend their money elsewhere. They had other priorities.

Bravo to Dallas and a dozen other communities that put half their local sales tax (1 cent per dollar) into the DART system. DART's light-rail success has won thousands of converts and demonstrated that rail-oriented development can be a winner in North Texas.

Give credit to Fort Worth, too, for committing half a cent to The T and rapidly expanding its program.

Twenty cities are members of mass-transit authorities in Dallas, Fort Worth and Denton, according to Senate testimony by Justin Keener of the Texas Public Policy Foundation. But 205 cities elected to opt out, with many increasing their sales tax — often by half a cent — for subsidies to businesses and other purposes.

Bedford, Burleson, Haltom City, Sanger and Mansfield are among the many that have separate tax funds for "economic development." Euless, Kennedale and Mesquite use the same tool to lower property taxes.

Some cities have sales-tax funds to pay for libraries, recreation and parks. The most popular application is for crime-control districts.

In all these cases, cities and their voters could have devoted sales tax to mass transit. Two years ago, the Legislature even amended the law on so-called 4A and 4B economic-development programs, so those funds could be spent on transportation.

No local cities changed their approach, Morris said, despite the urgency about commuter rail.

"This isn't a transportation funding crisis," said Keener, whose Austin group promotes low taxes and small government. "It's a funding priority crisis."

Morris' agency surveyed local communities last year to see whether they might devote sales-tax revenue to rail development. The vast majority were already tapped out, with commitments to a range of projects with bond debts that last a decade or two.

Duncanville needs sales-tax revenue for debt payments on a StarCenter ice rink, Morris said. Arlington devotes a half-cent to the new Cowboys stadium and another quarter-cent to streets.

When might Arlington be able to put sales tax into transit? the survey asked.

"Possibly in 20 years," the city reported.

Bedford doesn't foresee such sales-tax revenue "ever being available." In Euless, possibly in 2019. In Mansfield, possibly 2024.

"A lot of cities probably wish they could do it over again and use that money for rail," Morris said, noting that rail stations along the DART line have become an economic catalyst. "But they just don't have the capacity now. Or they're using the money to supplement operating costs, and they'd have to raise property taxes [if sales tax was diverted]."

That's not going to happen, so local leaders developed a regional funding plan. Initially, they proposed a sales-tax increase across the area, but businesses opposed the idea.

So lawmakers crafted a plan with a menu of taxing options, starting with higher taxes on gasoline. A series of new fees include up to \$15 for emissions, up to \$60 for car registrations and up to \$250 for people who register a car from out of state.

Welcome to Texas!

Morris said this area would probably limit its fundraising to a gas tax (6 cents per gallon should do it, but the bill permits up to 10 cents) and higher driver's license renewal fees. It's also important to note that the Senate bill does not impose the new taxes; it just gives communities the option to propose them — then voters must OK the levies.

As the bill advanced last week, it grew larger and more convoluted and expanded from North Texas to other parts of the state.

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Provisions now allow the taxes for sidewalks and hiking and biking trails, nice amenities, to be sure, but usually funded from existing revenue sources.

Many new fees have an exclusion for low-income residents. The Senate bill calls for a low-income assistance program to help some riders.

Generous gestures maybe, but too much of the hodgepodge that makes taxes so frustrating. And yet another reason for lawmakers to hold their nose when they vote for this.

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MITCHELL SCHNURMAN'S COLUMN  
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## CRIME

# 'Crash Dummy Bandit' strikes

By **DOMINGO RAMIREZ JR.**  
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The "Crash Dummy Bandit" hit again, again and again Monday.

The FBI reported Monday that a robber held up two credit unions and a bank in Texas. The suspect is dubbed the "Crash Dummy Bandit" because he has a bandaged nose and a limp, and his left arm is in a sling.

In all, authorities believe that the suspect is responsible for four holdups since Friday.

On Monday, the man hit a Euless credit union, then an hour later robbed a Dallas Wachovia bank, police said Monday. The most recent holdup happened Monday afternoon at the Federal Credit Union in Tyler.

He also may have been responsible for a Dallas bank



The Omni American Credit Union in Euless was robbed Monday by a suspect the FBI is calling the "Crash Dummy Bandit." The man is suspected in several robberies. COURTESY EULESS POLICE DEPARTMENT

robbery Friday, but he wasn't wearing his "Crash Dummy" uniform in that holdup.

"We don't know for sure if he's injured or not," Euless police Lt. John Williams said Monday. "He may be using that to throw us off."

In the Euless holdup, the man limped and had his left arm in a sling when he robbed the Omni American Credit Union of an undisclosed amount of money after he threatened a teller, police said.

The man hobbled out of the credit union, got into a

white Ford extended-cab truck and drove away, police said.

The robbery happened about 9:20 a.m. at the credit union, 2311 W. Euless Blvd.

Witnesses described the robber as a white man, about 6 feet 2 inches tall, heavy-set, with a goatee.

A witness wrote down a license plate number to the robber's truck. The Texas license number is 726H8V.

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## SOCIALEYES

# FILL YOUR WEEKEND WITH ART, FESTIVALS AND A BIG AUCTION

**Events in Southlake, Euless and Grapevine offer family fun from Friday to Sunday.**

**Weekend activities at full throttle:** From Arbor Daze and Art in the Square to City Slickers, festivals and fundraisers will fill your weekend calendar from sunup to sundown. Here's your planning guide for three days of fun:

**Art in the Square:** This juried art festival features more than 135 artists at Southlake Town Square. **Lori Palmer** says to arrive at 4 p.m. Friday, at 10 a.m. Saturday and again at 11 a.m. Sunday if you're determined not to miss a thing. Kudos to the Southlake Women's Club on its 10th year of Art in the Square and for the more than \$1 million it has raised for women's and children's chari-

ties in Northeast Tarrant County. This year's committee is led by **Lisa Quinn**, with help from **Susan Ansley**, **Patty Rogers** and others working hard to bring family fun for all.

Continuous entertainment begins Friday from Southlake hometown band Independent George. Breggett Rideau will open for the popular rock group, which covers music from Led Zeppelin, Nickelback, Billy Idol, U2 and the Kill-



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ers. Saturday's headliner is former Kansas City Royals outfielder turned country music star **Derek Sholl**, performing chart-topping ballads to contemporary Southern rock.

If you're hungry, the Le Bistro area will offer vendors to satisfy your appetite. Everything imaginable will be available, and wine and beer tastings are new this year. Adventures await those visiting The Zone, where bounce houses, airbrush tattoos, rock climbing and more are scheduled. Colored hairspray sound interesting? Then your child will be thrilled in the Kid's Korner. Children will love the face painting, sugar art and spin art action in this area, too.

Oh, and by the way, it's an art festival, so if you want to see the list of great artists, visit

www.artinthesquare.com. For information, call **Lori Palmer** at 214-244-9111.

**Arbor Daze:** The fun begins at 9 a.m. Saturday on the Euless City Hall campus at 201 N. Ector Drive and continues 2-6 p.m. Sunday. The free festival celebrates the importance of planting trees and their role in beautifying Euless. **Mike Davenport** of the parks and recreation department says: "If you're looking for a day full of fun for your whole family, Arbor Daze is the place to go." Two stages will offer continuous live entertainment featuring dancers, bands (**Eddie Coker** and **Dave Rudolf**) and lots of local performing groups. The Kidz Zone has nonstop fun for kids, who won't want to miss **Professor Brainius**, **Critterman**, **David Chicken**, **Safari**

**Scot** and more. Arts and crafts vendors will offer shoppers the chance to buy items not easily found in retail stores. **Trish McDonald** reports that the photo exhibit from the Historical Preservation Committee is a standout. Visit [www.arbordaze.org](http://www.arbordaze.org) or call **Mike Davenport** at 817-685-1662 with questions.

**City Slickers:** Billed as the largest silent and live auction in town, this year's event will include more than 500 items ranging from dental braces to sports tickets. Presented by the Colleyville Area Chamber of Commerce, the fun begins at 5 p.m. Sunday at the Grapevine Convention Center. **Kathy Welch** says that live entertainment by the fabulous Grapevine Opry is a surefire crowd-pleaser and that bidders can

fortify themselves with the delicious offerings from the various food exhibitors. **Hayley Wells** from the chamber warns about the expected hot competition at the auction Big Board this year. Tickets are \$15 and are available at [www.colleyvillechamber.org](http://www.colleyvillechamber.org) or the chamber office. Valet parking is free. The event is a good cause that funds programs such as Leadership Colleyville, Youth Leadership and Senior Leadership Northeast. If you want to know more, contact **Kathy Welch** at 817-488-7148.

**PLEASE SEND YOUR PRESS RELEASES TO FREEDER@STAR-TELEGRAM.COM AND IF YOU WANT TO SEE YOUR EVENT ON THIS PAGE, PLEASE REMEMBER TO UPLOAD PHOTOS AT CLICK.STAR-TELEGRAM.COM.**

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**Coming this weekend**

# Main Street

## **Arbor Daze festival in Euless**

**EULESS** — The city's 21st Arbor Daze festival celebrating the importance of trees and their role in beautifying a community is Saturday and Sunday at the Euless City Hall Complex, 201 N. Ector Drive. Events will include arts-and-crafts booths, entertainment, a Forestry Village, tree giveaways and a kids zone with entertainers, bounce houses, carnival games, face painting, clowns, prizes and other activities. The free festival, which has twice received the National Arbor Day Foundation's Celebration Award, runs from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. Saturday and 2 to 6 p.m. Sunday. Free parking is available at the complex. Additional parking is available at First Baptist Church Euless on the east side of the parking lot. Free shuttles will run from the church to the festival. Information: [www.arbordaze.org](http://www.arbordaze.org).

— Staff reports