
Behind the plan to save DART: How the transit agency reversed its fate in 120 days

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Behind the plan to save DART: How the transit agency reversed its fate in 120 days

DART Board Chair Randall Bryant had just months to stave off withdrawal elections. Here's how he pulled it off.

The Dallas Morning News

By [Lilly Kersh](#) - Staff Writer

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Randall Bryant, the DART chairman of the board of the directors and the youngest chair poses for a portrait at a Dallas Dart station in Dallas on March 4, 2026.

(Photos by Nathan Hunsinger)

Nathan Hunsinger / Special Contributor

Randall Bryant had been chair of Dallas Area Rapid Transit for less than a day when suburban cities started calling. [They wanted out.](#)

The night before, [Walt Humann](#), widely regarded as the father of DART, had sworn in the 38-year-old, who wore his signature custom-made bowtie. Bryant pledged to tackle simmering concerns over [governance and funding](#).

He had no idea those disputes were about to boil over.

City leaders told him they were considering [exit elections](#) that could fracture the region's transit system. Bryant didn't even have some of their phone numbers saved yet.

Suddenly, the youngest board chair in [the agency's history](#) had roughly 120 days to stop a political revolt before cities locked in ballots asking voters whether to abandon DART altogether.

"My biggest goal was to ensure that DART presented something to the cities that was a reasonable offer," Bryant said.

The [stakes were enormous](#). If multiple cities pulled out, it could gut DART's funding and threaten rail and bus service across North Texas. For frustrated suburbs, it was leverage in a long-running fight over whether the system is controlled too much by and spends too much in Dallas — and too little back home.

What followed was a frantic stretch of negotiations. Bryant and other [leaders scrambled](#) to assemble governance changes and financial concessions.

By late February, half of [the six cities](#) that called exit elections had backed down.

The fight exposed [how fragile](#) the 40-year-old transit partnership had become and how quickly it could splinter in one of the nation's fastest-growing regions.

Todd Little, executive director of the North Central Texas Council of Governments, a regional planning group, said Bryant's efforts helped keep the system intact.

“It has not only saved DART, it has saved regional transportation,” Little said.

The man behind the plan

Bryant comes from politics. His grandmother, [Kathy Nealy](#), served in the administration of President Bill Clinton on his advance team and [built a long career](#) as a political consultant.

Growing up in Hamilton Park, a historically Black neighborhood in North Dallas, Bryant knocked on doors at age 7 on behalf of Ron Kirk’s campaign, helping elect Dallas’ first Black mayor.

By 10, he was [taking the Red Line](#) from Park Lane to Oak Cliff to visit his grandmother and watch campaigns up close.

Today, Bryant runs his own government affairs, public relations and political consulting firm. His appointment to DART marks the fifth board or commission on which he has represented the city of Dallas, beginning in his 20s on the South Dallas/Fair Park Trust Fund Board.



DART Board Chair Randall Bryant listens to a speaker during a DART board of directors meeting, Tuesday, Jan. 13, 2026, in Dallas.

Elías Valverde II / Staff Photographer

He previously served as chair of the Dallas Black Chamber of Commerce, on the board of the North Texas Commission and on the governing board of the Texas Democratic Party. He's been on the DART board for about two years.

He's used to learning on the job and has no extensive background in transportation policy. His role, he said, is representing the public beyond the boardroom.

"My viewpoint is always to represent the voices of the people who don't even know the room exists," he said.

He feels the effects of his decisions up close. His father, who is mostly blind, relies on DART paratransit services as his primary transportation.

How the plan came to be

In February, Bryant presented a funding reform plan that combined multiple efforts to alleviate DART's strain on city pocketbooks. Plano leaders had called the proposal "[meaningful](#)," the first clear sign since November that negotiations might succeed.

Cities pay a 1-cent sales tax to DART, which amounts to more than \$100 million annually for Plano and Irving.

The funding reform proposal would [return 10% of the sales tax](#) cities contribute to DART for their own transportation projects over six years. The Regional Transportation Council, the transportation policy body of the North Central Texas Council of Governments, agreed to pitch in \$75 million to help DART give cities a portion of their taxes back.

Michael Morris, director of transportation for the North Central Texas Council of Governments, said agreeing to financially support DART over several years was one of the best days in the council's history.

Morris said his goal in giving a hand was to help create a transit institution for 2050, when [12 million people are projected](#) to call North Texas home, which includes four to five counties — not just a handful of cities.

"Imagine how hard a task that would be if you had to [now start without Plano](#), without Irving, without Farmers Branch," he said.

While leaders approved refunding some sales tax back to cities, DART board member Enrique MacGregor voted against the terms.

[“It’s harmful to DART,”](#) MacGregor said. He said the amount of refunded sales tax was not meaningful enough for cities’ transit needs. Other critics said the compromise was rushed or lacked adequate public input.

Bryant’s plan included establishing a regional rail authority combining multiple systems and identifying a new revenue source for DART, such as a vehicle registration fee. Both ideas would require legislative approval. Reform went beyond funding.

[Cities demanded](#) changes to DART’s governance structure, which gives Dallas the most influence on the 15-member board. The effort gained traction when Dallas agreed to relinquish some of its power.

“Nobody was going to join an agency that they didn’t have a say in,” Irving Mayor Rick Stopfer said. “The governance model was a huge win.”



The Regional Transportation Council held a well-attended meeting after a workshop to discuss the future of DART in Arlington on Thursday, Feb. 12, 2026.

Stewart F. House / Special Contributor

Down to the wire

Developing a plan took months of near-constant meetings, Bryant said. With the North Texas Commission, a public-private regional advocacy body, and the North Central Texas Council of Governments as mediator, city and DART leaders spent months [hashing out](#) a regional solution.

The toughest part, Bryant said, was crafting a deal that worked for all of [DART's 13 member cities](#), not just the ones threatening to leave. Cities were often focused on what was in it for them.

“Not that that’s a bad approach, but that’s a hard approach to accomplish for 13 cities and a transit agency,” he said.

Bryant said he was available for DART every day, “by choice or force,” attending [dozens of meetings](#). He arrived in his bowtie, ready to negotiate and build relationships with cities that had grown skeptical of the agency.

Humann said Bryant was “ever-present” throughout the negotiations and praised regional leaders, including city mayors, Morris and DART CEO Nadine Lee, for helping reach a deal.

Stopfer said he never believed DART was in danger of disappearing. Trains and buses would have continued operating if cities withdrew, he said, though not within those cities’ boundaries.

“I get a little frustrated when people say the agency was in trouble,” he said. “The agency was always going to be there.”

Still, the stakes were significant. If all six cities left, DART would lose nearly half its members and roughly a third of its sales tax revenue.

Cities voting to exit would also lose DART service almost immediately, forcing station closures, route cuts and major disruptions across the regional network.

On Feb. 23, [Plano became](#) the first city to cancel its election, followed by Farmers Branch the next day and [Irving on Feb. 26](#).

All three cited Bryant’s reform proposal and the new governance agreement as key reasons for reversing course.

[Addison](#) and [the Park Cities](#) are continuing with their May votes, but it was Plano and Irving, representing about 1.1 million residents, that posed the largest threat to DART’s future.

Bryant said he does not view cities that [kept their elections](#) as failures or those that canceled them as victories.

“I don’t fault cities for placing the items for their voters to vote on,” he said.

Ahead of the May 2 election, DART is hosting community meetings and a March 24 hearing on how successful withdrawal elections could change service across the region.

Bryant has attended some. He has a responsibility, he said, to share the agency’s value and how North Texans would feel the cuts.



DART Board Chair Randall Bryant addresses the Farmers Branch City Council during a special-called meeting regarding a DART withdrawal election, Tuesday, Feb. 24, 2026, in Farmers Branch.

Elías Valverde II / Staff Photographer

What’s next?

DART and [its member cities](#) now face the challenge of persuading state lawmakers to approve proposals on governance, a regional rail authority and new revenue stream. In the past, Bryant said, legislators told regional leaders to resolve their disputes locally before seeking help in Austin.

“The hard work is over, and the real work now begins,” Bryant said.

Morris is optimistic. “If you can speak with one voice, there’s a lot of things the Legislature will do for you,” he said.

Bryant also is focused on improving safety, adopting new technologies, [reducing stigmas](#) about transit, preparing for the World Cup and attracting new cities to join DART, which has not happened since the 1980s.

As for his own career, Bryant said he’s not looking beyond the work in front of him.

“I don’t have a plan,” Bryant said. “DART was not my plan. I’m wholly dedicated to where I am right now and accomplishing the things that I set out.”

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