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Challenges suit transit director to a tee

BY BETTY DILLARD

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Curvie Hawkins Jr. laughs at the irony that fills his life.

As a kid growing up in Wichita, Kansas, Hawkins once was thrown off a public bus for goofing around.

“That was my first experience in transit. It was a bad experience and now I operate the buses,” Hawkins, 38, said. “Who would have known 20 years later?”

With more than a decade of experience in the transit industry and with numerous awards and accolades, he currently serves as the director of planning for the Fort Worth Transportation Authority (The T). His wife, Laneshia Hawkins, is board support administrator at Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART). The couple lives in Arlington, one of the largest cities in the United States without public transportation.

“We’re just a transit family. Unfortunately, we live in a non-transit city,” he said. “But our kids will never lack for bus passes.”

Public transit in Arlington – as well as most of Tarrant County – is changing, thanks to Hawkins. His responsibilities include managing and directing all planning-related efforts for The T’s bus and rail service. The start date for Arlington’s new non-stop commuter service into downtown Fort Worth is around Sept. 1, says Hawkins, who also serves as chairman of the Arlington Transit Advisory Board.

Hawkins also oversees the planning of the Southwest-to-Northeast Rail Corridor, a \$471 million commuter rail line that will connect southwest Tarrant County into Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport and that could be operating as early as 2012.

A double graduate of the University of Texas at Arlington with a master’s degree in city and regional planning and a Bachelor of Science in economics, Hawkins never dreamed his legacy might involve such an ambitious undertaking.

“I didn’t come in thinking that was going to be my primary focus,” Hawkins said. “It’s a great project. I’m excited about it. I’m excited about transit. I just love transit. I wake up thinking about it.”

The rail project is about halfway funded, according to Hawkins, with the remaining 50 percent to come from federal funds. He expects the funding request to be in the federal pipeline in spring 2009.

Hawkins is currently working through environmental studies, which will be released in a public hearing in August, and negotiating for operation rights and leases with private railroads.

“It’s a very competitive process and it’s complicated,” he says. “It’s a long process and we have to be creative to find ways to get funding for it. It can’t happen overnight. Whenever this does go through, I want to be on the first train to the airport.”

Prior to joining The T in 2003 as one of its youngest directors, Hawkins worked in DART’s planning department, directing the development of bus feeder plans leading to the opening of two light rail lines.

“Those of us at The T board really thought we scored a coup when we were able to grab Curvie from DART,” says Gyna Bivens, executive director of North Texas LEAD. “I was chairman when Curvie was hired. I will never forget the first time I saw him present to the board. I remarked to Nancy Amos [The T’s senior vice president]: ‘Is he even 18? Does he have a driver’s license?’”

Recently given the 2008 Outstanding African-American Alumni award from UT Arlington, Hawkins says one of his greatest accomplishments was obtaining a bus stop for an elderly woman.

“I was on top of the world that I helped an older lady get a bus stop. She called me up and thanked me. I realized I had power to help people. I just enjoy empowering and helping people out,” Hawkins said. “To introduce a new bus route and then see people using that route is just the greatest thing. When I see heads on a bus going by, I know I’m providing accessibility and helping people get jobs and put food on the table.”

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