



**January 2026**

**\$25M Boost From State Clears New Path for Cotton Belt Trail**



Good news for North Texas cyclists and walkers: A key segment of the Cotton Belt Trail is one step closer to reality thanks to new state funding. With a \$25 million boost from the state, construction is moving closer on a key segment of the Cotton Belt Trail, a bicycle-pedestrian corridor that will run alongside DART's recently opened Silver Line and help stitch together North Texas' growing trail network.

The Texas Transportation Commission awarded the funding to DART for Phase 3A of the Cotton Belt Trail through the Transportation Alternatives Set-Aside Program, part of a statewide push to expand active transportation options. When complete, the 26-mile trail will stretch from Plano to Dallas Fort Worth International Airport, offering a continuous, safe east-west route for walkers and cyclists across multiple cities.

DART is managing construction of the trail, including 11 miles of Phase 2 now underway between western Addison and Plano. The newly funded Phase 3A will improve walking and biking access to the Cypress Waters, Addison and Downtown Carrollton stations along the Silver Line, which began passenger service in October. Construction on this phase is expected to begin by mid-2027.

Running along the historic "Cotton Belt Route," the trail honors a former rail corridor while advancing a broader regional vision led by the North Central Texas Council of Governments. Alongside projects like the 60-mile DFW Discovery Trail, the [Cotton Belt Trail](#) reflects a coordinated effort to improve mobility, connect communities and give North Texans more ways to travel safely by foot or bike.

"We are deeply appreciative to the Texas Department of Transportation and the Texas Transportation Commission for supporting the Cotton Belt Trail and other initiatives that help expand multimodal travel in our region," said Kevin Kokes, a program manager for the North Central Texas Council of Governments' Land Use and Mobility Options team. "By improving connections to employment, housing, education facilities, and recreational opportunities, these projects help build a stronger, more accessible future for everyone."

In addition to the Cotton Belt Trail Phase 3A, the Commission awarded almost \$30 million to six other projects across the Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area as part of a \$285 million infusion for bicycle and pedestrian transportation projects across Texas.

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## **Topic of the Month**

### **AN EYE ON: Growth in DFW**



Dallas-Fort Worth's population keeps climbing, neighborhood by neighborhood, suburb by suburb. As a new year dawns, the 12-county region remains on a steady path of population expansion that will influence transportation, land use and infrastructure decisions for decades.

For the first Topic of the Month of 2026, we explore our region's population growth and how, with careful planning and continued partnership, North Texas is well-positioned to meet the demands of a growing population. Understanding how population growth has unfolded, and where it is headed, is central to the mission of the North Central Texas

Council of Governments (NCTCOG) and its regional partners. Read more about the impact of growth in Dallas-Fort Worth [here](#).

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### **End of Ozone Season Highlights Region's 2025 Air Quality Conditions**



The 2025 ozone season has officially concluded in North Texas, marking another year of the region's ongoing effort to meet federal air quality standards. Ozone season runs annually from March 1 through Nov. 30, a period when higher temperatures and increased sunlight create favorable conditions for the formation of ground-level ozone, a harmful air pollutant that negatively affects air quality and public health.

The 2025 season ended with a design value of 83 ppb at two regulatory monitors in Collin (Frisco) and Tarrant (Fort Worth Northwest) counties. Therefore, the region remains in nonattainment of both the 2008 (75ppb) and 2015 (70ppb) National Ambient Air Quality Standards for ozone.

While emissions modeling indicates a decline in ozone emissions, air quality monitors across the region are not yet reflecting the same trend. Understanding and addressing this gap is a crucial focus of the transportation and air quality planning efforts in the region.

Although the ozone season has ended, air quality remains an important consideration year-round. Air quality can vary due to weather conditions, traffic congestion or other pollutants. Staying informed throughout the year allows residents to make conscious choices to support cleaner air.

The North Central Texas Council of Governments (NCTCOG) offers various [online resources](#) to keep individuals, businesses and local governments informed of the current state of the air and active air quality initiatives. Fundamental explanations and additional information can be found in NCTCOG's 2025 [Air Quality Handbook](#).

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#### **Former Broadcast Journalist Joins NCTCOG as New Agency Spokesperson**



The North Central Texas Council of Governments announced today veteran broadcast journalist Caroline Vandergriff has been selected as the agency's new Public Affairs and Communications Officer. Vandergriff will guide all media relations, public outreach, and strategic communication efforts for NCTCOG.

Vandergriff brings nearly 15 years of experience in television news, most recently as a reporter at CBS News Texas. Prior to returning home to North Texas in 2019, she served as reporter in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; Charlotte, North Carolina; and Lansing, Michigan. During her journalism career, Vandergriff led coverage of major regional events and issues of national importance, earning recognition for excellence in storytelling and community engagement. She also developed expertise in government reporting.

Vandergriff will serve as the primary contact for news media, in collaboration with existing department liaisons. Brian Wilson will remain the primary contact for the Transportation Department. Vandergriff will also coordinate public messaging across departments and lead agency-wide communication efforts.

"I've spent my career helping people understand what's happening in their local communities, and I'm honored to continue that mission at the North Central Texas Council of Governments," Vandergriff said. "As a fifth-generation North Texan, I'm deeply committed to the continued success of this region, and I hope to amplify the incredible work NCTCOG is doing to shape a better future for the metroplex, from workforce solutions and economic development to transportation infrastructure and public safety."

Joining the team at NCTCOG is particularly meaningful for Vandergriff because her grandfather, Tom Vandergriff, helped create the agency in 1966 and served as its first president. As mayor of Arlington for 26 years and Tarrant County Judge for 16 years, he was known as a champion for regional cooperation. Tom Vandergriff died in 2010 at the age of 84.

"My grandfather firmly believed that everyone in North Texas would succeed if they worked together, and that spirit of regionalism was instilled in me from an early age," Vandergriff said. "I'm both excited and humbled for the opportunity to carry on that legacy through NCTCOG."

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## Look Out Texans

Happy New Year! Be Active, Be Fit, Stay Safe



Popular New Year's resolutions often focus on improving one's health. Consequently, many North Texans are planning to live a more active lifestyle in 2026. A fun, cost-effective way to be more active in the new year should include incorporating walking or bicycling trips in your daily routine such as to work, school or for recreation.

Walking, jogging or riding a bicycle are not only good for one's physical health but also have mental health and social benefits. Not to mention, being active outside is more

affordable than gym memberships. Stepping outside to enjoy a stroll around the neighborhood park is 100% free! Even better, the cost for gym membership could go toward a bicycle and helmet. Now you can enjoy nature and avoid the crowded gym and the long wait for the free weights and machines.

If you are planning to be more active, keep these walking and bicycling tips in mind while on or near the road.

**Pedestrians:**

**Cross in crosswalks at intersections.** The safest place to cross is at a marked intersection. Pedestrians have the right of way at a crosswalk.

**Make eye contact with drivers before crossing streets.** Never assume a driver sees you. Making eye contact with drivers ensures they acknowledge your presence.

**Be Bright, Be Seen.** Wear bright or light colored clothing and reflective materials. Drivers can see reflective materials three times farther away. You can also carry or wear a flashlight to enhance your visibility.

**Bicyclists:**

**Stay alert.** Be aware of other vehicles and predict movements of drivers and pedestrians. Anticipate turning movements and opening car doors to avoid collisions.

**Use hand signals to let others know when you're turning, changing lanes, or stopping.** Signaling your intentions gives drivers notice of your movements. Look over your shoulder and up ahead (scan), then signal your turn and make your move.

**Be seen while riding at night.** Wear bright or reflective materials so motorists can see you. Additionally, bicyclists are required to use a headlight and a rear reflector or rear red light.

**Why It Matters:**

Use the new year as a fresh start to be more active while staying safe. Understanding how pedestrians, bicyclists, and drivers interact on our roadways is crucial for the safety of all North Texans: our families, friends and neighbors. **Looking out** for one another can make all the difference.

For more tips on walking, bicycling, and driving safely, visit [LookOutTexans.org](http://LookOutTexans.org).

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*Local Motion is a monthly email newsletter from the North Central Texas Council of Governments Transportation Department. For more information about topics, contact Brian Wilson at 817-704-2511 or [bwilson@nctcog.org](mailto:bwilson@nctcog.org). Visit [www.nctcog.org/trans](http://www.nctcog.org/trans) for more information on the department.*

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