

Commentary: VIA plan offers route out of inequity

Dax Moreno - Oct. 16, 2020

When I look at the history of San Antonio's critical infrastructure and essential services, a common thread emerges: As a city filled with generations of builders and doers, why have we consistently given ourselves the job of doing more with so much less?

In recent years, though, San Antonians have been changing that narrative. When allowed to invest in ourselves and our communities, we do — and San Antonio is the better for it. We've approved massive municipal bond programs for expanding the streets and sidewalks of our neighbors, improving drainage in critical areas throughout San Antonio, and providing community services, such as libraries, senior centers, and police and fire departments.

Now, we have another opportunity to invest in our community and ourselves. On Nov. 3, we can say "yes" to Proposition A, which would increase funding without increasing the local sales tax rate, to implement VIA Metropolitan Transit's Keep SA Moving plan. It's a chance to right the historic underfunding that has put our transit system behind every other major Texas city, and has hurt our ability to attract new builders and doers to our community.

Austin, Dallas and Houston all created their metropolitan transit agencies after VIA blazed that trail. They all approved use of the full 1 cent of sales tax the Texas Legislature made available for public transit — after San Antonians had approved the choice presented to them in 1977: to supply VIA with a ½-cent sales tax. In the ensuing decades, those cities have seen billions of dollars of additional transit funding because of their tax rate and larger economies.

VIA and Houston Metro serve areas that are the same size, but Houston's annual budget is \$758 million, and VIA's is less than \$190 million. That means VIA is serving the same size area as Houston but at 25 percent of its budget. No wonder the underfunding hole feels so big.

In San Antonio, it's always been my experience we take care of each other. And this November, we have an opportunity to dig our way out of that hole.

A strong public transit system acts as one of the single best antidotes to systemic inequity by providing essential mobility — a direct line to opportunity. It connects people to education. It connects people to workforce development programs. It connects people to better-paying jobs.

And, best of all, it connects communities — which is essential for San Antonians and vital for our economy. As we compete for business, a modern transit system is a critical component for companies deciding where to locate. Companies go where the talent is — and it's often in cities with well-developed transportation systems that enable robust lifestyle and living options.

This November is an opportunity to chart a solid course for our future. VIA has continued to move essential workers during the global pandemic — and we've seen that transit remains a fundamental component to the foundation of our economy. And we know that San Antonio's population is still on track to balloon during the next couple decades, with the regional population expected to exceed 3 million.

That means the future of the agency is not exclusively buses. VIA's plan would provide transportation choices for all San Antonians by investing in technology and innovations, optimizing routes, connecting first- and last-mile trips, and planning for the expansion of services like VIA Link, a ride-share service that is efficient and nimble.

Innovation requires investment and consistency. On Nov. 3, we can say “yes” to moving our community forward — “yes” to investing in our future and ensuring that all San Antonians have access to opportunity.

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