

Editorial: A welcome compromise on sales tax vote

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Riders climb aboard a VIA Primo bus back in 2015. We like the compromise between Mayor Ron Nirenberg and VIA Metropolitan Transit to meld workforce development and transit for a future sales tax vote.

Photo: Billy Calzada /San Antonio Express-News

We see a lot of potential good in a compromise between VIA Metropolitan Transit and Mayor Ron Nirenberg about how to deploy future sales tax dollars.

This compromise, which voters will have to approve in November, would dedicate the city's 1/8-cent sales tax to workforce development before shifting to improve public transit.

In a world often framed in either/or terms, it was initially disheartening to see VIA's board attempt to push ahead on a sales tax vote without any public consideration for workforce development in this COVID-19 moment. Yes, VIA has historically been underfunded, receiving far less in sales tax dollars than similar transit authorities in other major markets. And, yes, before the COVID-19 pandemic, Nirenberg and Bexar County Judge Nelson Wolff were moving forward to shift sales tax dollars to VIA.

But this pandemic has revealed stark inequities across San Antonio and a dire need to invest in workforce training. Roughly 160,000 San Antonians are out of work, and we have no idea when the people who support the hospitality industry will be comfortable flying again, much less eating in restaurants or attending conferences.

The economic recovery is going to be a long slog, and this is an opportunity to create new skills for disenfranchised workers. Investing in workforce development, particularly around information technology and health care, is a chance to create a new economy and steer people into new careers that are less prone to recessions.

This compromise welds transit and workforce development. And while some might see an awkward marriage of policies and priorities, we see two complementary initiatives.

If approved by voters, the first three years of this round of sales tax funding would be dedicated to workforce development and economic recovery. After that, it would shift to VIA. There are many questions to answer before November: How will this money be spent on workforce development? What metrics will be used to gauge success or failure? What happens after three years if this workforce program proves successful? How will VIA prioritize these additional funds?

Voters deserve specifics, but we do have a rough sense of where this might go. Nirenberg has formed a diverse leadership team to craft a long-term framework around workforce training. This team includes, among others, representatives from the Charles Butt Foundation, COPS/Metro Alliance and the San Antonio Chamber of Commerce; Mike Flores, chancellor of the Alamo Colleges District; University of Texas at San Antonio President Taylor Eighmy; and Texas A&M University-San Antonio President Cynthia Teniente-Matson.

The aim is to build on a COPS/Metro Alliance plan, approved by City Council this summer, to invest \$80 million in workforce development with the goal of training 10,000 people. Those enrolled in the program will receive a weekly stipend of \$450 — \$15 an hour for 30 hours a week — to help cover expenses.

In the most basic sense, these are funds that will cover rent, groceries and other bills while people gain new skills. But the program should aspire for much more, and our hope is this leadership group will develop a framework for people to achieve four-year degrees.

As for VIA, our hope is these funds will be used to prioritize a proposed advanced rapid transit line that spans from the North Side to the South Side, connecting San Antonio International Airport, downtown and Brooks City Base.

Nirenberg will still need to find a way to maintain Edwards Aquifer protection and complete the Howard W. Peak Greenway Trails System, for which these sales tax dollars are presently dedicated. But politics is the art of the possible.

Improving public transit and funding workforce development are pressing issues that have the power to transform and connect our community in meaningful ways. The task ahead is ensuring the public agrees.