

City to ask voters whether to redirect 1/8-cent sales tax toward workforce education

Author: Erica Zucco (KENS 5)
 Published: 6:16 AM CDT August 13, 2020
 Updated: 4:15 PM CDT August 13, 2020

San Antonio city council voted to put the workforce development question on the November ballot at its Thursday morning meeting.

SAN ANTONIO — Thursday morning, San Antonio city council voted 9-2 to approve a ballot measure asking voters to decide whether to redirect a 1/8-cent sales tax fund toward workforce development for four years. Currently, the funding source is used to fund aquifer protection and linear creekways; the city says plans are underway for alternative funding of those programs.

In his remarks ahead of the vote, Mayor Ron Nirenberg thanked council liaisons for the project Councilwoman Rebecca Viagran and Councilwoman Adriana Rocha Garcia, and a team of business and community leaders that collaborated to form the plan.

He noted both historic issues and recent unemployment filings as evidence of the need for action, and said the plan lays a framework for where San Antonio will "go from here" to get people back to the work in the short-term, and build a more equitable economy over time.

Councilman Clayton Perry and Councilman Roberto Treviño voted against approving the measure.

Councilman Perry said while he supports workforce development, he believes more money should be focused on supporting existing small businesses, as opposed to "long-range plans." He said voters should have a choice between aquifer protection and workforce development, and is concerned that proposed funding alternatives for aquifer protection could lead to eventual water bill rate hikes.

Councilman Treviño said while he believes the plan holds a great deal of hope, his priority is direct aid and relief for residents, including help with housing and digital access for students. He also voiced concern that the wraparound services and emergency assistance grants included would not be enough to include San Antonians most in need of support.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

Mayor Ron Nirenberg says the proposed workforce development initiative would fund a workforce training program aimed at offering both short-term certificate options for in-demand jobs and funding for completion of 2-4 year collegiate programs in growing industries.

"It can't be understated," Mayor Nirenberg said. "San Antonio has struggled, prior to COVID, with chronic underemployment, and the fact is that many people in our community- thousands of families- have struggled in poverty as a result of it. So what we need to recognize is that it's not good enough to go back to the way things were when people were still struggling on the brink."

Hear more from the Mayor on the proposed program below, or through the Commerce Street podcast.

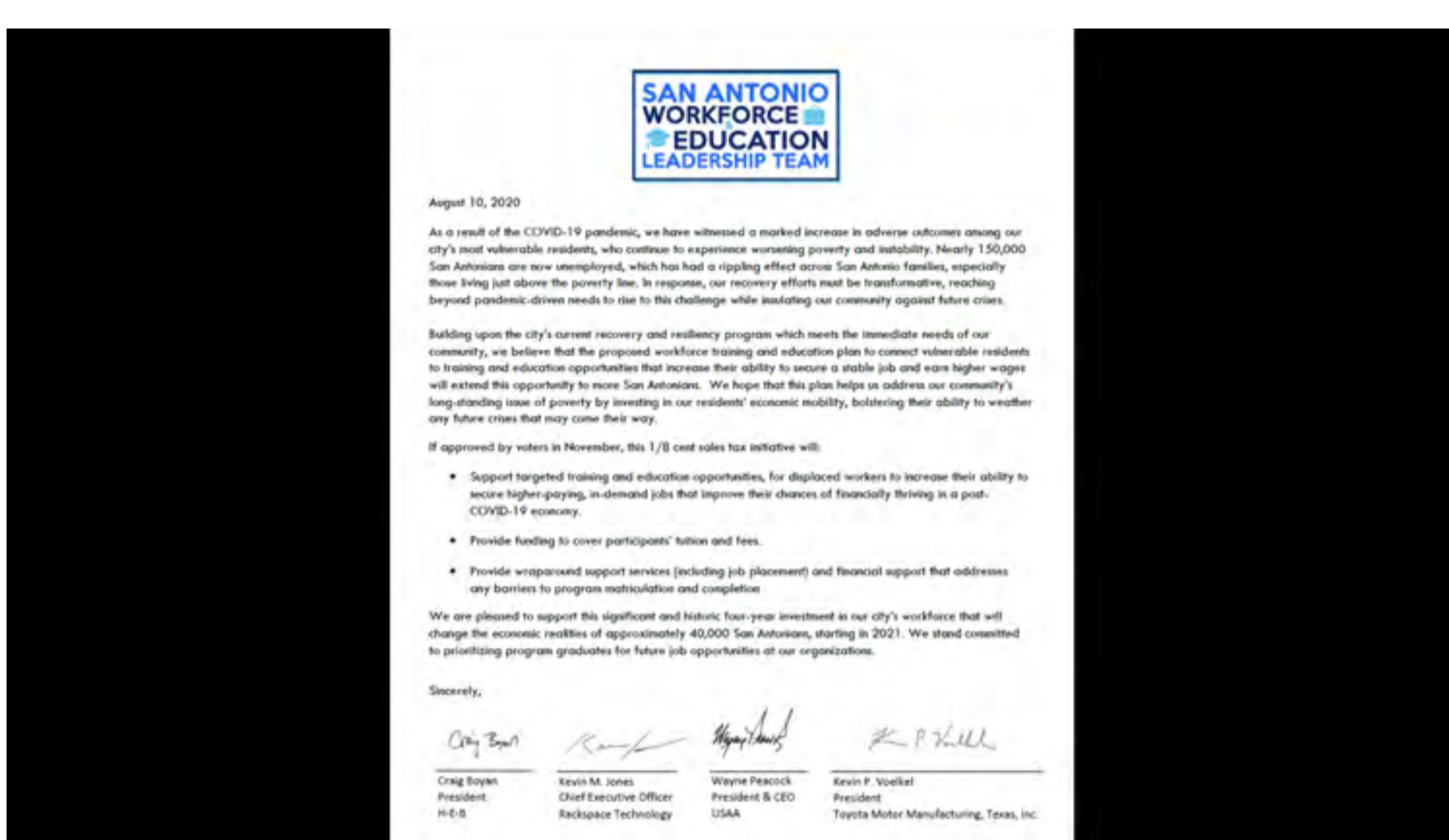


The Mayor says CARES Act funding, distributed through the city's Recovery and Resiliency Plan, is currently set to assist an estimated 10,000 workers over the next year. If approved, the 1/8-cent sales tax funding would be used to serve an additional 10,000 workers per year for the next four years.

"We have a short-term strategy in place with the CARES Act resiliency program; this creates a bridge and a mid-term strategy, to last about four years, to get us to a long-term, brighter future," Nirenberg said.

"So what we want to accomplish here is to ensure that San Antonio families can get back to work, and those who have been displaced, particularly those whose jobs may never come back - are able to acquire the skills and education to get into the jobs that will which, by and large, are requiring more education and skills. By doing that, we create the spark that I believe can start to break generational poverty in this community."

Local business leaders from H-E-B, Rackspace Technology, USAA and Toyota Motor Manufacturing Texas, Inc, as part of the San Antonio Workforce Education Leadership Team, issued this letter in support:



The COPS/Metro Alliance released this statement in support on Wednesday, August 12:

"COPS/Metro supports the proposal to use the 1/8th cent sales tax to fund workforce development.

For generations, hardworking San Antonians have been dependent on low-wage jobs and have struggled to provide for their families. They are fed-up with local companies going outside our community to fill position because of the lack of skilled residents. Hard working San Antonians deserve better! They deserve the opportunity to retrain & upskill to find meaningful employment that provides a living wage & promotes dignity. Our community is at a defining moment with over 150,000 residents unemployed. The need for skilled training & effective workforce development is now! The time to act is today.

This money should be used to expand Project QUEST and to implement strategies similar Project QUEST at Alamo Colleges District, University of Texas at San Antonio, and Texas A&M University-San Antonio.

COPS/Metro created Project Quest in 1992. It has been proven the gold standard in workforce development. Last year, the New York Times stated: "Project Quest has succeeded where many similar retraining efforts have failed, taking workers lacking in skills and successfully positioning them for jobs where they can earn double or triple what they did previously". Community Leaders must further insist that the Quest model be the foundation to any sustained effort to upskill San Antonio's unemployed/displaced workers.

In 2001, COPS/Metro and its sister IAF (Industrial Areas Foundation) organizations created this opportunity when they passed the "Better Jobs Act" (https://statutes.capitol.texas.gov/Docs/LG/htm/LG.379A.htm). It is time to put this legislation to work.

COPS/Metro, along with Mayor Ron Nirenberg, has championed the investment in workforce development as a way to open the door to a good jobs economy and ending the economic segregation that has plagued San Antonio for decades. As Mayor Nirenberg stated, "we must provide avenues for San Antonio families to move forward on steady career paths, not just move from one job to the next." "Any" job is not necessarily a "good" job."

VIA METROPOLITAN TRANSIT INITIATIVE

Under a compromise struck by city, county and VIA leaders, voters would also be asked to approve redirecting that funding toward VIA, after four years funding the workforce training initiative is complete. This would be in a separate question, written and called by VIA's board.

VIA's Advanced Transportation District Board of Trustees has called a special meeting for **Thursday, August 13** to discuss calling for that referendum and to discuss the language that would appear on the ballot.

During its '2020 State of Transit' presentation, VIA Metropolitan Transit and the San Antonio Mobility Coalition discussed the new plan, its origin, and what it might include.

VIA Metropolitan Transit President/CEO Jeff Arndt says before the pandemic, VIA was hoping to roll out the 'VIA Reimagined' plan. Then, the pandemic hit, and "travel slowed to a crawl" as people stayed home to prevent the spread of coronavirus. He says VIA focused on preserving essential services as its primary modes of funding dropped, and within the first few weeks, they lost nearly 50 percent of ridership.

The agency increased cleaning and disinfecting schedules, limited passenger capacity and required face masks- as well as suspending fare collection for front line and essential workers to reduce crowding at the farebox, while still providing 80 percent of its routes and preventing layoffs. Now facing a different financial reality, VIA is proposing 'Keep San Antonio Moving.'

Arndt says 'Keep San Antonio Moving,' or 'KSAM,' maintains the same purposes and priorities as the prior plan: improving current metrics, including frequency of routes; innovating to provide new and tailored services which may include vehicles other than 40-foot buses; and rapid transit. The biggest difference, Arndt says, is how much money is available and what they can do with that funding.

You can learn more about the Keep SA Moving plan here.

VIA leaders say the plan is meant to maintain and improve service, especially for its core membership of riders. The agency says its "average rider" takes VIA 5-7 days a week, often to work jobs that can't be worked from home – with a large proportion of riders living in households that don't have cars, and that earn incomes of less than 25-thousand dollars per year.

VIA Board Chair Hope Andrade says their core focus with the ballot initiative is ensuring riders who rely on VIA know it will always be there- with safety measures and secure funding.

"To make sure they have the transportation they needed to get them to their jobs, to get them to their medical appointments to get them to visit their family, or to get them to their training classes, which the Mayor's program is proposing."

"Our proposal is simple," Andrade said in the presentation. "We need to ask the voters to support returning transit dollars to transit use. We say that because the funding being discussed was intended, 40-some years ago, and designed to support transit. You heard how the other major cities all took advantage of the 1 cent and we didn't, for reasons unknown. That's in the past. But that was the only funding the state provided for transit. So the community has told us, and what we're saying is- let's finally use that funding for transit. And we're able to. And we're able to. We have an opportunity because in December of 2021, the 1/8 portion of sales tax will become available and needs to be re-allocated."

"So our board and our staff worked hard to reach a compromise with the city and the county leaders to be able to bring that decision to voters on November 3rd. The tax will generate about \$38.5 million dollars per year and this will definitely fund the plan to Keep SA Moving."

FUNDING FOR AQUIFER PROGRAM & GREENWAYS

Aquifer and greenway program advocates and leaders say they have relied on the funding source for years- and want to be sure there is a confirmed, secure, sustainable source of funding in place.

Some aquifer advocates speaking at Thursday morning's meeting also voiced opposition to redirecting funding altogether, and concern about their input on the proposal. Greater Edwards Aquifer Alliance Executive Director Annalisa Peace said during Thursday morning's meeting that while she agrees the city has many needs, it's crucial to make sure choices make the city "both sustainable and equitable."

Thursday morning, city manager Erik Walsh said plans are underway to continue funding both programs. The Mayor says city staff has been working on a plan for aquifer protection funding for months. As of now, the city is likely to present that proposal at the CAB's meeting on August 26, according to CAB.

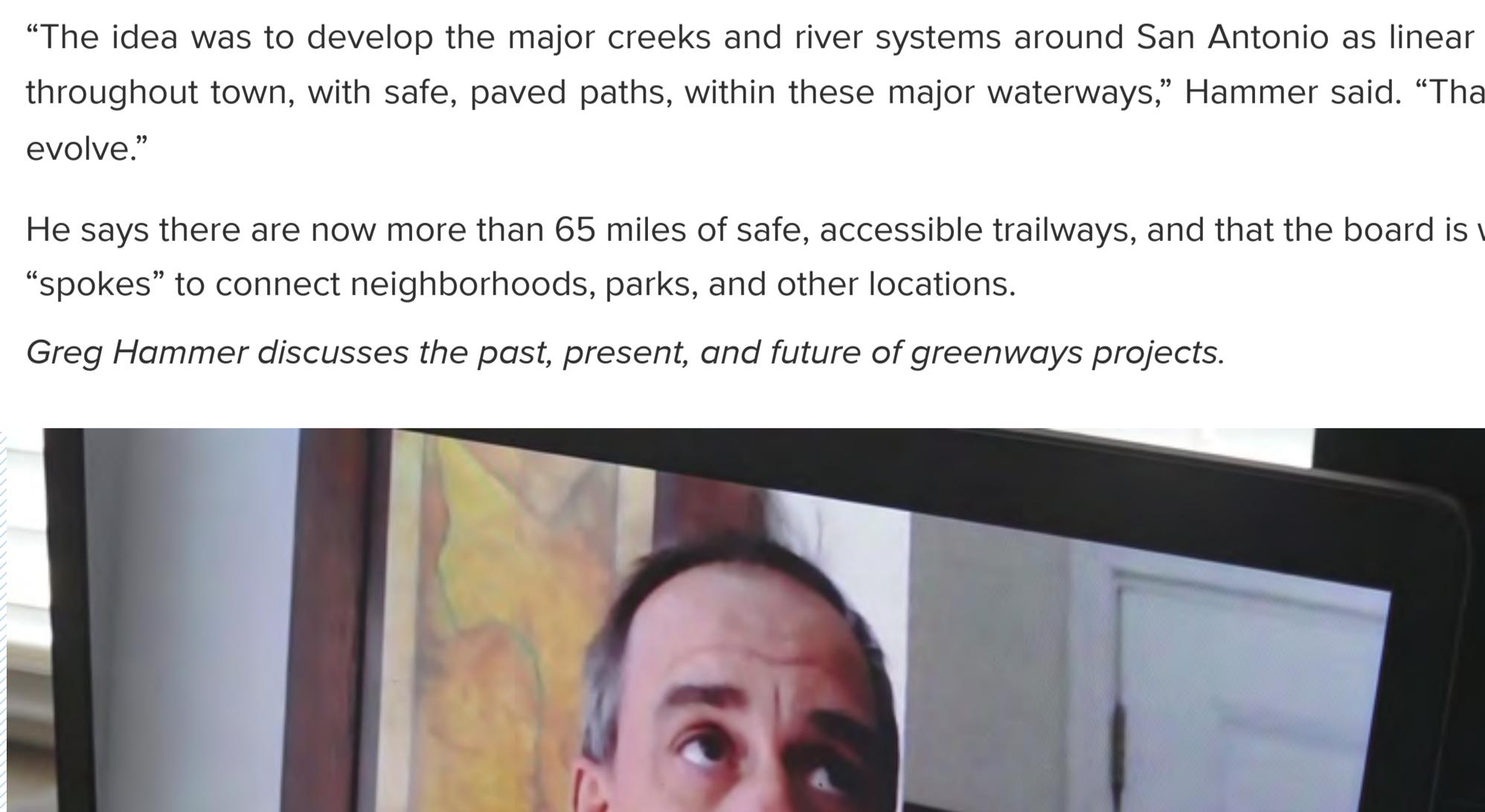
Dr. Francine Romero, Chair of the city's Conservation Advisory Board, says the board will review the alternative and give its opinion on the extent to which it replicates the existing program.

As for greenways -- Greg Hammer, chair of the Linear Creekway Parks Advisory Board, says substantial progress has been made on plans for trails across the city, but that the board believes there is still work to do to connect the system, develop other eligible right-of-ways, install amenities and maintain what's already in place.

"The idea was to develop the major creeks and river systems around San Antonio as linear parks, connecting various parks and other amenities throughout town, with safe, paved paths, within these major waterways," Hammer said. "That vision has since become a reality and continues to evolve."

He says there are now more than 65 miles of safe, accessible trailways, and that the board is working to finish a loop around the city and creating "spokes" to connect neighborhoods, parks, and other locations.

Greg Hammer discusses the past, present, and future of greenway projects.



Hammer says as of last year, they were hoping to ask voters for support again in May of 2020 to fund some of that work but learned about the city's potential alternate plans for that funding source in the fall of 2019. He says he is not aware of a confirmed, sustainable, reliable funding solution.

"It's tough to see an end for this system development because it continues as we identify other areas where we can put pathways- drainage rights of way, utility rights of way- we have yet to use much of that, which includes connection of huge population centers and community assets," Hammer said.

Hammer says he's also heard discussion of the county taking over management of and funding for the program. "The County is waiting to see the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic on the County's budget and then will reassess at that time," a spokesperson wrote in a statement on Wednesday, August 12.

Officials say there are limited ways to legally fund transportation initiatives such as VIA, and limited funding sources for programs such as the workforce development proposal.

Though not opposed to plans for fostering workforce development or improving transportation, aquifer and creek way advocates say their own work is still underway -- and they want to make sure funding is in place.

A BROADER PLAN

While a combination of the CARES Act funding and ballot initiative funds would likely help around 50,000 workers, supporters hope it's a catalyst for broader change, and goes hand-in-hand with efforts such as AlamoPROMISE to offer education and targeted training for higher-wage, in-demand jobs.

"We are in the midst of an economic crisis of historic proportions, and this comes on top of the fact that we know San Antonio has had historic issues with generational poverty and underemployment," Mayor Nirenberg said. "We have an opportunity now, as a community, that we have not only get San Antonio families back on their feet and our economy recovered- but that we can also build a strong economy for the future, in which families, workers are not going from one job to the next- but proceeding up the economic ladder."

San Antonio does not have to be one of the poorest big cities in the country. We are putting ourselves, now on the path to economic resilience and equity for our entire community."