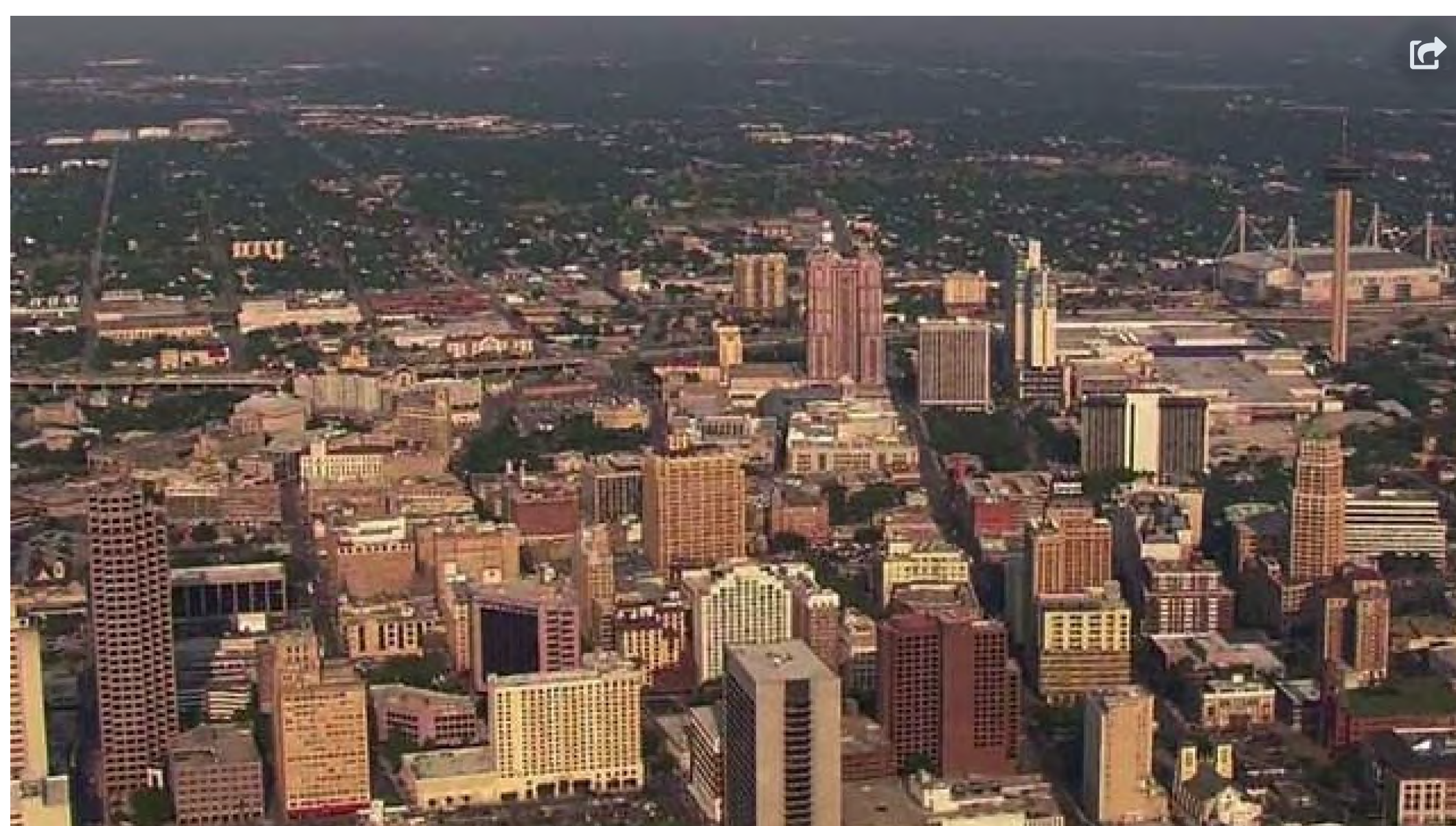


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Voters will consider 1/8 cent sales tax for workforce training and education, then transportation in November

Tax that funds aquifer protection and linear parks will expire in 2021; city and VIA asking voters to use it after



San Antonio – San Antonio voters will be asked to consider a double hand-off of a 1/8 cent sales tax at the ballot box in November.

The tax in question currently funds the Edwards Aquifer Protection Program and the development of Linear Creekway Parks. But it is expected to expire sometime in the spring or summer of 2021 when it reaches the \$180 million cap voters set for it, leaving the estimated \$38.5 million it would bring in annually available for a different use.

Both the San Antonio City Council and the VIA Metropolitan Transit Board - through its role as the Advanced Transportation District Board of Trustees - voted Thursday to put consecutive collections for the tax onto the Nov. 3 ballot.

The city wants to use the 1/8 cent sales tax through Dec. 31, 2025 to fund a workforce training and education program that it estimates will help about 40,000 people get better paying jobs and help break cycles of poverty.

Then, beginning Jan. 1 2026, VIA wants the money to go toward the ATD, from which it would get half of the revenue and fund improvements to its transportation system and options.

The hand-off is consistent with a [deal announced by Mayor Ron Nirenberg and VIA officials in July](#). But both elements would require voter approval. The actions of the city

council and the ATD board only get the issues onto the ballot.

Also on the Nov. 3 ballot is an initiative to [reauthorize a separate 1/8 cent sales tax to continue funding the Pre-K 4 SA program](#).

CITY TAX PLAN

City Council members approved putting the tax issue onto the Nov. 3 ballot by a vote of 9-2. District 1 Councilman Roberto Trevino and District 10 Councilman Clayton Perry were the only two opposing votes.

Details of how the city's program would work are still vague, though the broad strokes include paying for workforce training or two and four-year degrees for up to 10,000 people a year. The ultimate goal would be placing participants into careers with at least \$15 per hour jobs and benefits and to help alleviate the city's ongoing issues with poverty, which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

VIA, Mayor agree on plan to use 1/8 cent sales tax for economic recovery, then transportation

The new program is meant to continue the work of a short-term \$75 million program council members already approved as part of a [\\$191 million recovery & resiliency plan](#). The "Workforce Development Pillar" of that plan includes subsidized job training and certifications for in-demand occupations as well as \$450 per week stipends for participants.

Though the new program would still provide what city staff called "wraparound services," like career mapping and case management, it would not include stipends for participants. Instead, participants would have access to emergency aid on a case-by-case basis.

Alejandra Lopez, the director of the city's Economic Development Department, said the wraparound services would also include connecting participants to existing social service resources, including housing, childcare, and utility assistance.

Mayor Ron Nirenberg has pushed for the program, saying many in the city were struggling economically long before COVID-19.

"We've had the plans, the reports and the ideas. We can re-litigate the past until we're blue in the face," Nirenberg said. "But over 150,000 San Antonio residents, our neighbors, have filed for unemployment in the wake of this pandemic. A quarter of those jobs won't be available ever again. We need action now."

While companies and educational institutions like HEB, USAA, Toyota, UTSA, and Texas A&M have lent their support, some residents concerned about aquifer protection have spoken against taking this funding stream away from the EAPP.

City Manager Erik Walsh said the city is finalizing details on a plan to continue the EAPP, but funding it with \$100 million of borrowed money over 10 years while paying the debt with some of the revenue the city gets from SAWS.

Walsh said they plan to present an ordinance to the Conservation Advisory Board for review later this month before bringing it to council in early September.

As for linear parks, Walsh said he and Nirenberg are working with County Judge Nelson Wolff and County Manager David Smith to finalize a plan to get the county to take over the construction of the parks.

Perry referenced the EAPP and linear creekway trails during his comments, which he says will still have to be paid for. Primarily, though, he seemed more concerned that the city was focusing on long-range plans when there were short-term issues from the pandemic to deal with.

"I'm all for workforce (development). Don't get me wrong," Perry said. "But our business community is hurting right now. If we could help them navigate through this crisis that we're in, it would keep people to work, not these long range plans."

Meanwhile, Trevino worried there's a lack of short-term assistance to help struggling families right now, and the services the program would provide wouldn't be enough to support them through the education or training process.

With clear emotion, he recalled how his single mother chose to forego her own dreams of higher education because she couldn't do it without a risk of destabilizing her family.

"The likely participants are going to be the ones with viable chances of successfully completing the program," Trevino said. "Given the obstacles that some of the underprivileged applicants face over and over others, I believe that my mother would not make the cut into the particular program. The wraparound services and even the emergency assistance grants would not be enough."

VIA TAX PLAN

The VIA Metropolitan Transit Board - acting in its role as the ATD board - unanimously agreed to put its tax question onto the Nov. 3 ballot just a few hours after the city council's vote.

VIA and its supporters have long said the agency is underfunded. While other transit agencies around the state receive 1 cent in sales tax, VIA receives only 1/2 cent.

The ATD currently collects another 1/4 cent in sales tax, but that's split between VIA, the city, and the county, with VIA taking half the money and the other two each getting 25% for highway and mobility projects.

The tax that the board is asking voters to consider would bring the total ATD share of sales tax to 3/8 cent.

VIA Board Chairwoman Hope Andrade said getting the additional 1/8 cent will "finally secure a viable source of funding, which is intended for transit."

"The plan is to finally return transit dollars to transit use in order for the city to have an adequate, innovative transit system deserving of our beloved city."

VIA plans to use the funding for its ["Keep SA Moving"](#) plan, which includes plans to strengthen core service, expanding mobility options like VIA Link, and getting plans for a new Advanced Rapid Transit system "shovel ready."