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VIA CEO: 1/8 cent sales tax would fund better bus service, more mobility options, prep for new "ART" system

VIA wants voters to approve 1/8 cent sales tax for transit starting 2026



San Antonio – VIA Metropolitan Transit officials have their sights set 11 weeks into the future as they hope San Antonio voters approve sending a 1/8 cent sales tax to public transit during the Nov. 3 election.

The agency's President and CEO Jeffrey Arndt says that if voters decide to approve the tax, which would divert to transit in 2026, VIA will be able to increase bus service in the core service area, expand mobility options further out, and begin planning for an "Advanced Rapid Transit" system.

He and other VIA officials see this as a chance to catch up on decades of chronic underfunding.

Using the difference between how far a driver and a VIA rider could get in 45 minutes as an example, Arndt said that people who rely on the transit system have less access to jobs and opportunities and are "essentially trapped within the general area in which they live."

"And we want to help address that," Arndt said. "We want to over help overcome that. And it will take additional investment in order to do that."

VIA's board of trustees, in their capacity as the Advanced Transportation District board of trustees, **ordered the 1/8 cent sales tax onto the ballot in a vote on Aug. 13**. If voters approve, the tax revenue would be funneled towards transit spending beginning in 2026.

It's one of two proposals that will appear on the Nov. 3 ballot for the same 1/8 cent sales tax, which would bring in an estimated \$38.5 million annually.

The City of San Antonio is also asking voters to let it use the money through 2025 for a workforce development program to fund job training or higher education degrees for 40,000 people.

The tax the city and VIA are eyeing currently funds the creation of linear creekway parks and the Edwards Aquifer Protection Program, but it is set to expire sometime in the spring or summer of 2021. City officials have been looking for alternative funding sources for aquifer protection and linear parks, but no plans have been finalized.

Since neither the city or VIA would be using the tax at the same time, there would be no increase in tax rate.

If voters were to approve the tax for the ATD, it would continue on in perpetuity after 2026, being used for "advanced public transportation services, operations, passenger amenities, equipment and other innovative, advanced public transportation purposes or public transportation mobility enhancement purposes."

Though the ATD would split the tax revenue between VIA (50 percent), the county (25 percent), and the city (25 percent), Arndt said it will all go to the same purpose.

"And so whether that advance those advanced transportation projects are funded, are paid for directly through the city's coffers or through the county's coffers or through VIA's coffers, they're all going to be advanced public transportation projects," Arndt said. "We are proposing with both of our partners to enter into some kind of inter-local agreement about how we actually accomplish that. But the main point is those dollars are dedicated transit."

Though the dollars wouldn't come in for more than five years, VIA has plans on how to spend it. In a presentation to the VIA/ATD board before their vote Aug. 13, VIA staff showed that the tax revenue would be split between three areas:

- Expanding Mobility Options: 45 percent
- Rebalancing System: 40 percent
- Capital & Technology: 15 percent

The mobility options refer to services such as **VIA Link**, which continues to operate as a ride share-style program in a small area on the Northeast side.

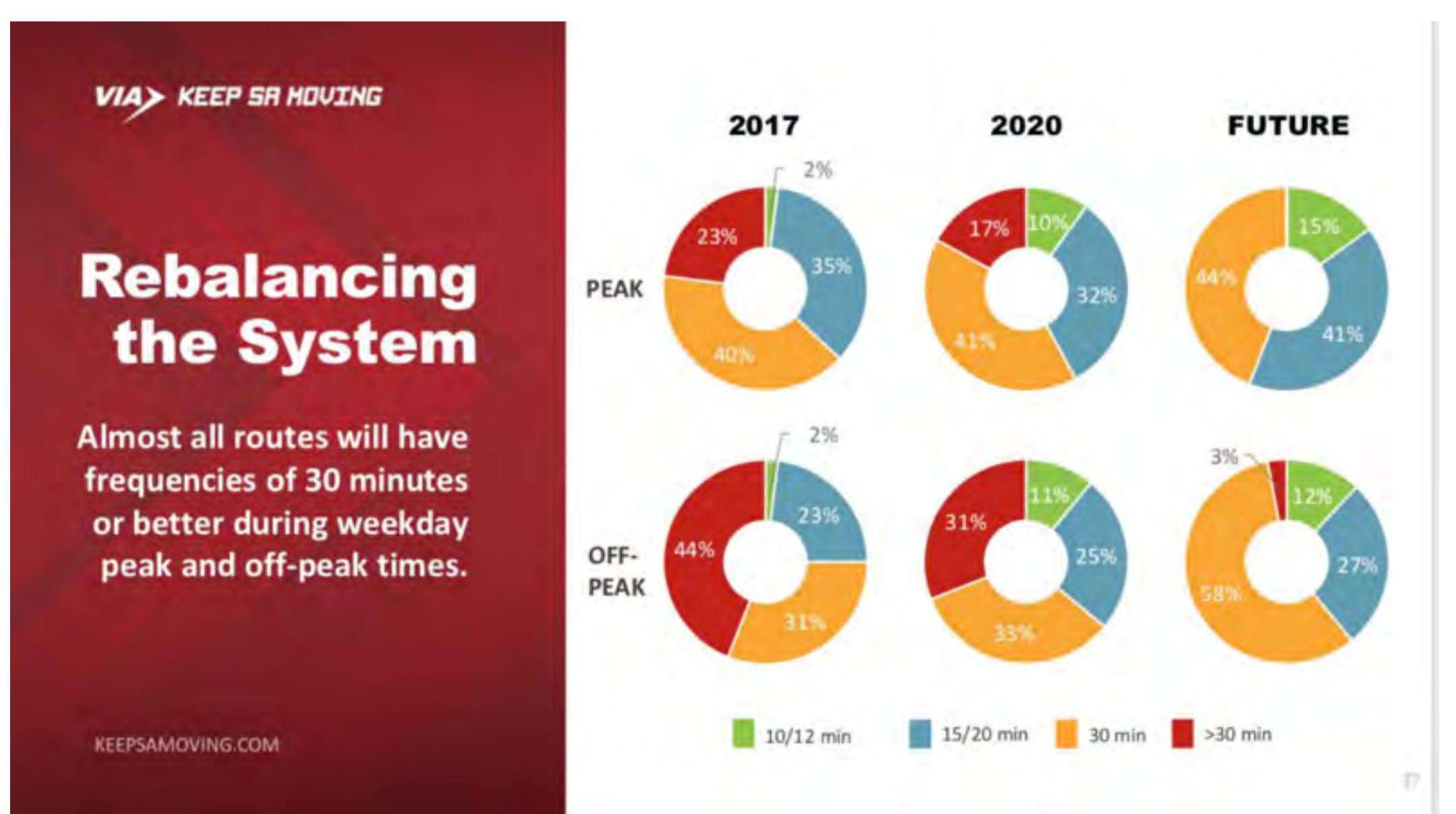
Meanwhile, "rebalancing the system" includes efforts to improve bus service in the core service area. Arndt said the agency would continue to speed up service, similar to what it has done with VIA Primo, and continue to increase bus frequency.

Back in 2017, about 23 percent of VIA's service had waits over 30-minutes long between buses during peak hours, according to a chart presented to VIA/ATD board members, and it was even worse during off-peak hours - about 44 percent of VIA's service.

VIA has previously **used additional funding from the City of San Antonio to increase frequency on some routes**, which it says has resulted in more ridership. The same VIA chart

shows waits of 30 minutes or more for 17 percent of its services during peak hours and 31 percent off off-peak hours.

Arndt indicated that with the new ATD tax, VIA could eliminate the long waits during peak hours and cut them down to about 3 percent of service during off-peak hours.



As part of a presentation to VIA/ATD trustees on Aug. 13, VIA staff showed plans for improving frequency along routes.

But even if voters approve it, the tax wouldn't send money to VIA until 2026. In the meantime, Arndt said VIA would take the next few years to "prune" its system - cutting and consolidating routes.

"I'd say we're preparing the field, if you will, for the further improvements," Arndt said.

The smallest portion of the tax revenue would be used for capital facilities and technology, including getting plans for an ART system ready to go. ART, which was a centerpiece of the VIA Reimagined plan, would involve larger buses driving in dedicated lanes, with the goal of 10 minute service or better all day long along four corridors.

Getting the system into place would require additional funding, Arndt said - a large part of it federal.

Arndt said VIA could use even the promise of the tax revenue coming in eventually to leverage more funding.

"Having that assuredness of funding in the future is really important for VIA as a system to be able to, for example, if there's an infrastructure program in the next year or two, for us to be able to leverage those programs because, again, we will have the money to operate assured through the vote," Arndt said.

Neither VIA or the city's plans are guaranteed. Voters could end up approving both uses for the sales tax, just one, or neither.

VIA currently receives 1/2 cent of local sales tax, compared to the full, one cent that other major metro transit agencies in the state receive. The ATD takes another 1/4 cent, of which VIA gets half.