

'Not Easy, But Attainable': VIA Determined to Push Hard for Sales Tax Election

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A VIA Metropolitan Transit bus drives through San Antonio. Credit: Scott Ball / San Antonio Report

As VIA Metropolitan Transit prepares for a November ballot measure to reallocate a one-eighth-cent sales tax from Edwards Aquifer protection to transit, board members said they are cognizant of the work required to win the election.

The VIA Metropolitan Transit board members [voted July 2](#) to move forward with asking voters to approve shifting the sales tax that currently funds aquifer protection and linear creekway trails to address what VIA calls “chronic underfunding.” The move doesn’t have the support of Mayor Ron Nirenberg or Bexar County Judge Nelson Wolff.

Trustee Kristi Villanueva urged her colleagues Thursday to keep pushing the sales tax reallocation issue with their networks during a VIA intergovernmental relations and public affairs committee meeting.

“I want to make sure I drive the point home: There’s a lot of work that needs to be done,” she said. “There’s only a few of us [in the meeting who] have been involved in campaigns before. This is a 24/7 deal.”

“We do not want to lose this opportunity because it’s so easy for us to lose ground. The vote is not ours. This is not easy by any means, but it is attainable.”

Nirenberg and Wolff both originally championed reallocating that revenue to transit, but Nirenberg [pulled his support](#) because he said VIA no longer planned to use the sales tax revenue to fund expanding transit under VIA Reimagined, a plan that the transit agency shelved due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Nirenberg said last week that the increasing number of COVID-19 cases shows why San Antonio needs to “reevaluate our priorities.”

“I have likened the trajectory of our city to a simple equation,” he said in a statement. “Transit remains a variable in that equation, but we must talk about the order of operations in the wake of this virus.”

Instead of VIA Reimagined, the transit agency has been touting a new campaign: “[Keep SA Moving](#).” VIA staff continues to work on the plan, which is “shifting what it means to ‘reimagine’” the transit system, according to language on the agency’s website. VIA aims to have a finalized plan by August, according to Chief Strategic Officer Marisa Bono.

“In recent months, the board of trustees has created a path to address VIA’s historic, chronic underfunding and to redesign the regional transit system for a post-COVID 19 future,” Bono said on Thursday. “When COVID-19 hit, we realized that transit is going to be a critical part of recovery for the city, and we realized our strategic plan would need to change because our riders’ lives would change.”

VIA’s new strategic plan will focus on “core” riders who depend on VIA for transportation – typically low-income residents without another mobility option, Bono said. VIA will work to preserve access to jobs, economic mobility, basic goods and services with its “recast” strategic plan, Bono said. The plan will also “substantially expand” [mobility-on-demand services](#), known as VIA Link. [VIA Link](#) currently operates in one part of Northeast San Antonio and allows people to order a ride to another place within the operating zone or to a nearby VIA bus stop.

Now, VIA will work to gather public input and publicize “Keep SA Moving” with telephone town halls and marketing campaigns, Bono said. Because of the coronavirus pandemic, the transit agency cannot hold in-person gatherings.

“For the first time in transit history, we will be conducting this campaign almost entirely virtually,” Bono said.

In the wake of the pandemic, VIA’s first priority also has pivoted from expanding ridership to recovering and retaining ridership, said Rachel Benavidez, director of communications. Between September 2019 and December 2019, VIA tracked between 3 and 6 percent ridership growth, she said. But starting in March, ridership dropped by about 45 percent.

“Pre-COVID, we were poised for growth,” Benavidez said.

VIA plans to schedule its first tele-town hall meeting for “Keep SA Moving” this month.