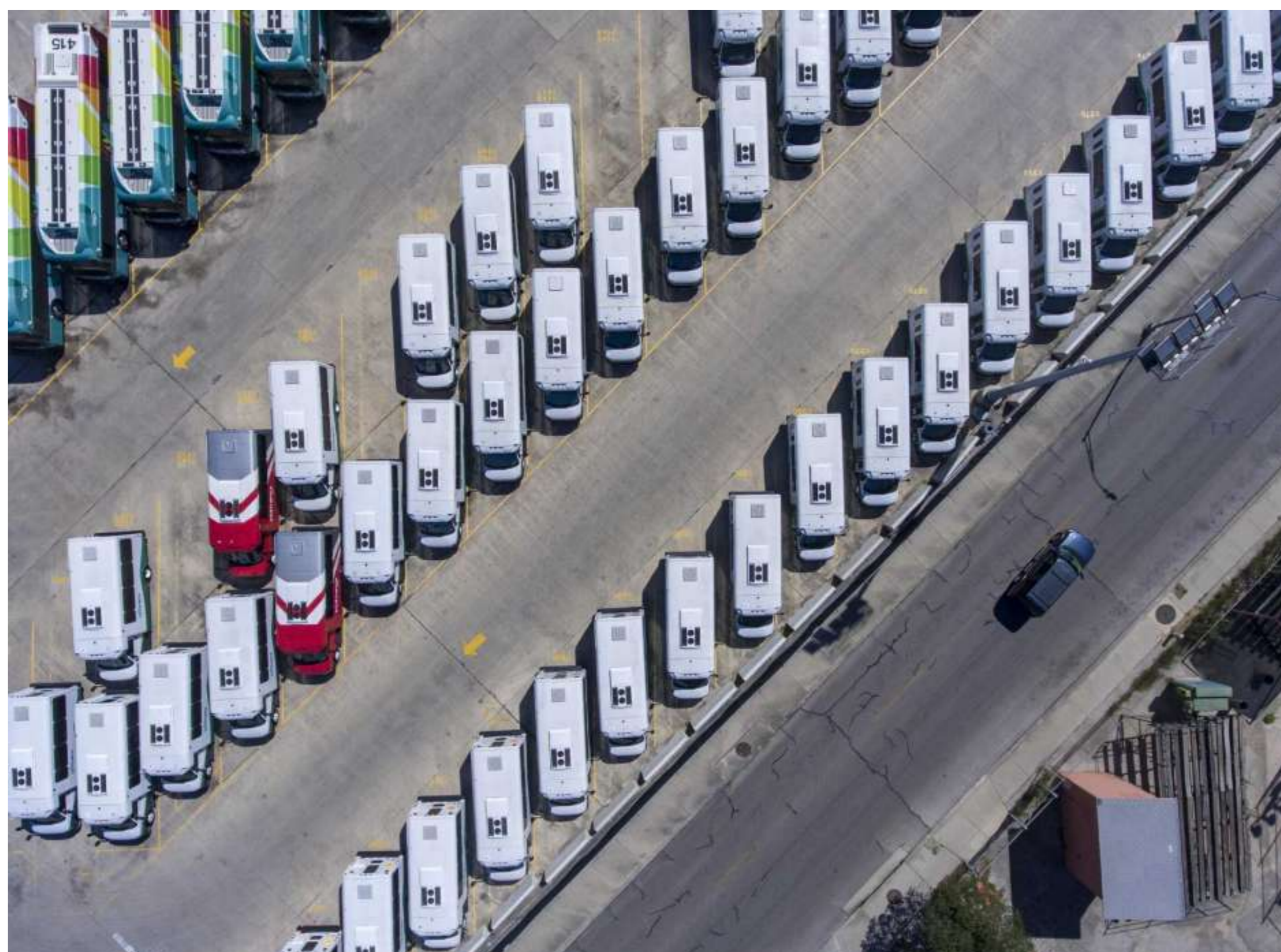


Commentary: No economic mobility without robust transit

By Jeffrey C. Arndt, For the Express-News

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Would increased funding for VIA — its buses are seen above — put opportunity within reach for more San Antonians? Or is the tax proposition poor public policy?

Photo: William Luther /Staff photographer

For years, VIA Metropolitan Transit has been engaged in conversations with the community about public transit's role in San Antonio's ever-expanding population and economy.

It happens at neighborhood meetings, talks over coffee and now in virtual forums with hundreds taking part in digital discussions where we've exchanged countless comments and questions with members of the public.

"Does VIA have a plan?" tops the list. The answer is "yes."

"What is it?" is inevitably the next question.

Keep SA Moving is based on the fundamentals in the VIA Vision 2040 and VIA Reimagined plans, and has evolved as we adapt to account for the financial and social impacts of COVID-19.

VIA's plan is designed to improve transit frequency, expand mobility options and apply emerging technology with a focus on supporting the local workforce and economic development.

The plan reflects the core belief that public transit puts opportunity for more people within reach — and that a city's economy must include an accessible transportation network. You can't have economic mobility without physical mobility. Even if you do not ride VIA, you are likely affected by the work of people who do.

The plan is available for download at [KeepSAMoving.com](https://www.viamt.com/keep-sa-moving), and includes materials with details about the plan design, timeline, proposed investments, and information about the proposition related to transit funding on the Nov. 3 ballot.

Another frequent question: Would the implementation of the plan require a tax increase?

If approved, a 18-cent portion of existing local sales tax would be rededicated to VIA's Advanced Transportation District beginning in 2026 for implementation of Keep SA Moving. This would occur without a net increase in current tax levels.

VIA would increase the frequency and hours of core services — bus service that delivered more than 36 million passenger trips last year, including more than 1 million paratransit trips on VIAtrans.

It also is designed to replace bus service and improve access to the system with new, on-demand transit zones using smaller vans that would change the way many people access transit.

More than half of VIA riders are employed, usually full time, and ride VIA five to seven days a week. Most live below the poverty level and don't have access to a personal vehicle. Many cannot work from home. Forty-two percent more residents would have access to frequent bus service, and 30 percent more people would access service to job centers for the first time. This includes low-income populations, people in homes with one car or fewer, and people with disabilities.

The initial pieces are already in place. Beginning in 2021, we would see two new mobility-on-demand services, system adjustments to consolidate overlapping bus service, more service on heavier routes, and expanded no-cost access to on-demand service for VIAtrans customers. Full expansion of these concepts would begin in 2026, assuming additional funding is available.

San Antonio is in the top five major U.S. cities for growth. Bexar County will see 1.6 million new residents and more than 1 million more vehicles by 2040, according to estimates. If that holds, we can expect an 82 percent increase in commute times.

Transit options address rapid growth in the community and on our roadways by moving more people faster and getting more cars out of the way. High occupancy vehicle lanes, like the ones that opened in late September, and Express Routes connecting major job centers and on-demand transit zones are part of the plan to help address congestion. And we would be making Advanced Rapid Transit shovel-ready, so we can leverage outside funding.

Yes, VIA has a plan. It's designed to improve transit and put opportunity within reach for more San Antonians. Yes, it would make transit easier to get to work and home again. It would provide a more accessible service to all San Antonians. It would put resources, including buses and smaller vans, where they're needed. It addresses the priorities the community helped identify through conversations that continue today.

VIA plans to keep San Antonio moving.

Jeffrey C. Arndt is president and chief executive officer of VIA Metropolitan Transit.