

Commentary: VIA is crucial to economic mobility

By Ezra Johnson, For the Express-News

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Riders board the bus on Blanco Road. A potential cut to service could undermine our economic recovery and make it harder for essential workers to commute during this pandemic.

Photo: BOB OWEN /San Antonio Express-News

“Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.” Those words of comfort were offered by Fred Rogers to children (and their parents) coping with catastrophic events.

The helpers in San Antonio and Bexar County have risen to the challenge of the COVID-19 disaster. Unlikely heroes have joined the front lines of our pandemic response. They are food service personnel, grocery store clerks, home health aides and maintenance workers — the essential workforce often unseen in less turbulent times. These vital workers also often earn low wages and have limited options for personal transportation.

Now the helpers need our help. They need reliable service to get to work and many others need help getting access to food and care services. That’s where VIA Metropolitan Transit comes in. Throughout this crisis, VIA has been there for essential workers— the helpers with limited transit options. Our employees are out there every day heroically providing a lifeline to those who need it most.

Looking ahead, VIA is projected to experience catastrophic financial losses and an uncertain future without additional funding and support. These losses will affect our ability to maintain operations and prevent us from providing millions of passenger trips over the next several years. That would be devastating for the essential workers who rely on VIA.

Because VIA’s sales tax funding is already billions of dollars behind other major Texas systems — even before COVID-19 — we have become experts at providing service on a tight budget. Our staff knows how to squeeze every dollar. But the projected loss of funding to VIA due to the economic effects of this virus will be too much even for their impressive skills.

If projections are correct, VIA will have an operating deficit of approximately \$126 million in the next five years. We can’t borrow funds and we can’t run at a deficit. Something is going to have to give.

VIA management has provided the board of trustees several options for making up the projected shortfall. In addition to tapping VIA’s rainy day fund, these include service, staffing and benefit cuts. Any fare increases small enough to avoid undue hardship during an economic crisis won’t fix this. Salary and benefit cuts won’t fix this. VIA must reduce service to close the projected budget gap, and if implemented, these cuts will disproportionately affect our most economically vulnerable riders at the worst possible time.

We know a massive effort is needed to plan for our region’s economic recovery. The mayor announced job creation and workforce training as recovery measures and was eyeing a ½th-cent share of sales tax to invest in everything from jobs programs to housing security and broadband expansion. Everything but transit.

If VIA can access the ½th-cent sales tax—the only legal option we have for funding — currently used to purchase conservation easements outside of Bexar County, we could avoid cutting service during a COVID-19 recovery. Investing in a lifeline for transit users will ensure people have a way to work, buy food and supplies, and have a chance at recovery.

Our city and county governments have done a commendable job navigating this crisis and a reexamination of priorities is understandable. It would also be extremely short-sighted to abandon all the recent work done to improve transit access in our region, possibly forever.

You can’t have economic mobility without actual mobility. Improving access to public transportation will always be one of the most effective tools in the local government toolbox for addressing huge gaps in equity that transit helps bridge.

Where you live doesn’t have to determine how you live — if you have options that put opportunity within reach. For all these reasons, I urge our leaders to stay the course. Keep your commitment. Be there for our helpers. And continue to support much-needed funding to keep San Antonio moving.

Ezra Johnson is secretary of the VIA board of trustees.