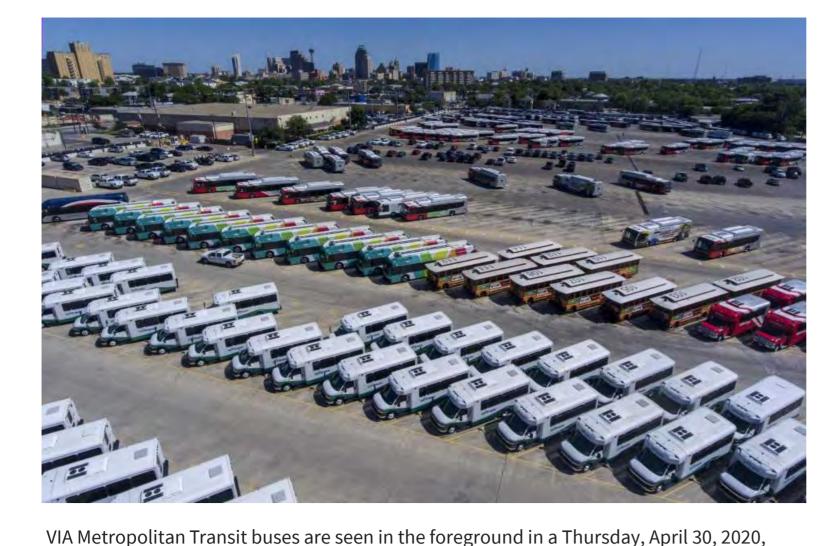
Garcia: Nirenberg's VIA compromise a win-win for the city

Updated: July 22, 2020 6 a.m. **Gilbert Garcia** July 22, 2020



aerial image as the San Antonio skyline rises in the background. The COVID-19 coronavirus has caused VIA to delay the November VIA Reimagined 1/8-cent sales tax vote until probably May 2021 according to the transportation company's CEO Jeffrey C. Arndt. Photo: William Luther, Staff / Staff Back in January, the plan was simple.

Mayor Ron Nirenberg would present San Antonio voters with a chance to renew the city's Pre-K 4 SA program during this year's May 2 election. Then he would concentrate on passing a November referendum asking voters to redirect a 1/8-cent sales tax from aquifer protection and linear creekway trails to public transit.

confusing voters with multiple sales-tax proposals on the same ballot. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted those carefully crafted plans.

The strategy adhered to a fundamental political concept: Keep things simple. You don't want to risk



Photo: Bob Owen, Staff / San Antonio Express-News Facing public-health concerns about the safety of conducting an election in May, Gov. Greg Abbott

Mayor Ron Nirenberg speaks with the San Antonio Express-News Editorial Board, on

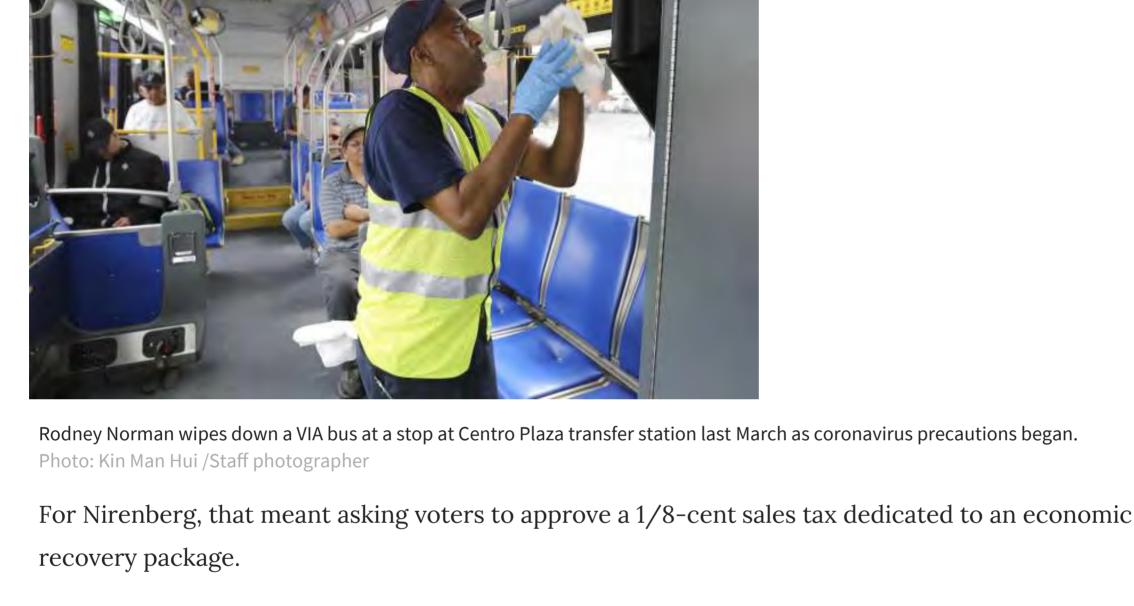
Wednesday, Nov. 29, 2017.

issued a proclamation allowing local election officials to push back the May 2 election to November.

Then Nirenberg cooled on the idea of putting a public-transit referendum on the November ballot.

He privately expressed the feeling that a fire was raging in San Antonio, in the form of the coronavirus. He believed that he needed to put out the fire before he could address long-term objectives such as

the expansion of public transit.



The VIA Metropolitan Transit Board, however, saw its already anemic revenue base shrinking from the economic fallout of COVID-19 and concluded that waiting was not an option. So the board went

forward with plans to put a 1/8-cent sales tax referendum on the November ballot.

This created the possibility that voters would soon be presented with three sales-tax items — Pre-K,

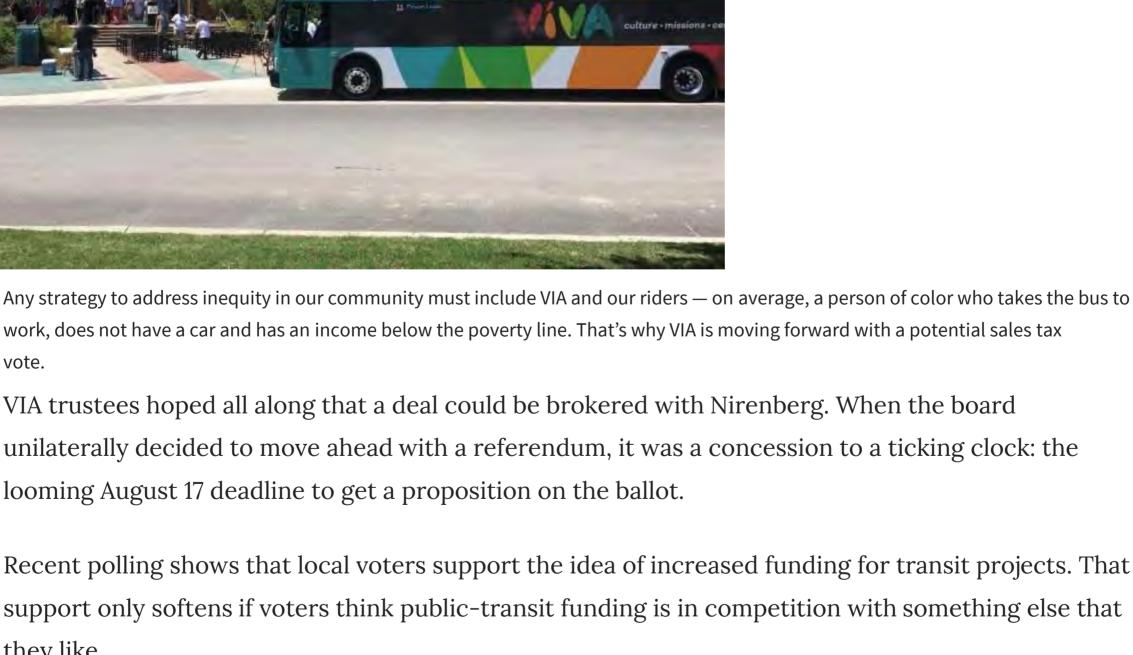
public transit and economic recovery — and only enough sales-tax capacity to cover two of them.

Given those fears, it was a relief to learn last week that Nirenberg and VIA reps (with diplomatic assistance from former Mayor Henry Cisneros) worked out a deal which will enable the mayor to go forward with his workforce-development package while committing to hand over the 1/8-cent sales tax to VIA after three years, if voters approve the arrangement.

It's not an ideal situation for VIA, which could certainly use the funding boost right away. But it offers

the promise that help will be on the way. It also means that this new revenue stream will be locked in,

by voter decree. And it means that the mayor will be a proponent and not an opponent of the VIA sales-tax campaign.



Any strategy to address inequity in our community must include VIA and our riders — on average, a person of color who takes the bus to work, does not have a car and has an income below the poverty line. That's why VIA is moving forward with a potential sales tax

they like. A San Antonio poll conducted by Baselice & Associates from June 11-15 found that 69 percent of

respondents favor an initiative to enhance funding for public transportation. The same poll also found that 82 percent of respondents agree with the notion that during the COVID-19 pandemic, VIA is needed more than ever.

A February poll released by the Bexar Facts group similarly demonstrated local support for VIA, with 64 percent supporting a new 1/8-cent sales tax dedicated to public transit. But that support hinged on the assumption that Pre-K and aquifer protection would also get their funding.

percent said Pre-K and only 7 percent said transportation. The new agreement offers the hope that voters can get all three of these wish-list items, plus

When asked to pick a top priority for allocation of the 1/8-cent sales tax, 42 percent said water, 30

Nirenberg's proposed adrenaline shot for the local economy. (Aquifer protection likely will get absorbed into the city's general fund.) At this point, a 1/8-cent sales tax in San Antonio translates into about \$36 million of annual revenue.

But under the conditions of a Texas statute that applies to advanced transportation districts, the transit tax would be split in three ways, with VIA getting half of it and the city and the county each taking a fourth.

In other words, even after the three-year wait stipulated by the VIA-Nirenberg deal, the transit agency will still end up getting only a piece of what it needs to meet all its service goals. But this will move us in the right direction.

Keep in mind that when Nirenberg successfully challenged Ivy Taylor for mayor in 2017, he did so with

Nirenberg's campaign door hangers defined such a city by promising to "get San Antonio moving with a modern, comprehensive, innovative transportation plan that is citizen driven and voter approved."

In November, he'll start to make good on that promise.

the slogan, "The City You Deserve."