

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

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VIA Metropolitan Transit buses are seen in the foreground in a Thursday, April 30, 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.

The strategy adhered to a fundamental political concept: Keep things simple. You don't want to risk confusing voters with multiple sales-tax proposals on the same ballot.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted those carefully crafted plans.



Mayor Ron Nirenberg speaks with the San Antonio Express-News Editorial Board, on Wednesday, Nov. 29, 2017.

Photo: Bob Owen, Staff / San Antonio Express-News

Facing public-health concerns about the safety of conducting an election in May, Gov. Greg Abbott 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.



Rodney Norman wipes down a VIA bus at a stop at Centro Plaza transfer station last March as coronavirus precautions began.

Photo: Kin Man Hui / Staff photographer

For Nirenberg, that meant asking voters to approve a 1/8-cent sales tax dedicated to an economic recovery package.

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 vote.

VIA trustees hoped all along that a deal could be brokered with Nirenberg. When the board unilaterally decided to move ahead with a referendum, it was a concession to a ticking clock: the looming August 17 deadline to get a proposition on the ballot.

Recent polling shows that local voters support the idea of increased funding for transit projects. That support only softens if voters think public-transit funding is in competition with something else that they like.

A San Antonio poll conducted by Baseline & 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.

When asked to pick a top priority for allocation of the 1/8-cent sales tax, 42 percent said water, 30 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 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 the slogan, "The City You Deserve."

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.