

Editorial: The way forward for workforce development here

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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

Now that Mayor Ron Nirenberg's workforce development plan is on the November ballot, the focus must turn to three important themes: assuaging concerns about sustaining Edwards Aquifer protection and the city's greenway trails program; crafting a clear message about investing in people; and ensuring workforce program participants will be placed in new careers.

Let's start with aquifer protection.

Supporters of Edwards Aquifer protection have raised concerns about a potential abandonment of this long-running and popular program — even though Nirenberg has been unequivocal in his commitment to it. The program uses city sales tax dollars to buy conservation easements over the aquifer's recharge zone in Bexar County and beyond. It strikes an elegant balance of preserving private property rights and the Edwards Aquifer, San Antonio's primary source of drinking water.

If anything, we have only seen and heard concern — not opposition — to maintaining these programs from the mayor and City Council. And for good reason. Since 2000, voters have backed using a 1/8-cent sales tax on aquifer protection and expanding the city's greenway trail system.

But Nirenberg, who rose to political prominence championing aquifer protection, has signaled a way forward without sales tax dollars. He has suggested using \$100 million over the next decade from San Antonio Water System funds to continue the Edwards Aquifer protection program. No, it's not \$200 million over 10 years, but it's a substantial investment in water security and extends the popular program. And it does not preclude other entities — say, the Edwards Aquifer Authority — from pursuing conservation easements to supplement the program.

The greenway trails are just as popular and either can be completed by Bexar County or folded into an the next city bond.

Nirenberg needs to formalize future funding for both programs well before the election. Any uncertainty will fuel potential opposition to workforce development. Supporters of aquifer protection and greenway trails should be natural allies for investing in people and addressing endemic poverty in one of America's most economically segregated cities. If protecting the aquifer is about preventing a future crisis, we also must recognize too many San Antonians are living in the crisis of poverty.

This brings us to messaging.

Yes, the ballot language for workforce development and transit will be complicated. Under the plan, the city will dedicate \$154 million in sales tax revenue to workforce development through 2025, potentially aiding 40,000 people in gaining new skills and developing new careers. After that, the sales tax would shift to VIA Metropolitan Transit, which has been chronically underfunded compared with similar transit authorities in major Texas cities.

But the message should be simple: This is about investing in people.

It's about providing opportunity to the 154,000 residents who have lost jobs in this pandemic. It's about building a new, higher wage economy in San Antonio and striving for generational change. It's about reducing endemic poverty and shortening the persistent food distribution lines that have been a hallmark of this pandemic.

Investing in transit is also about investing in people and the effort to end economic segregation.

It's about delivering on the promise of a rapid transit line that links the North Side, San Antonio International Airport, downtown and Brooks City Base. It's about providing mobility options in one of America's fastest-growing big cities.

Finally, Nirenberg needs to assure voters about accountability.

One reason the Edwards Aquifer protection and greenway trail system programs are so popular is the public has immense trust in how these sales tax dollars are spent. This workforce development program needs to match that trust with clear metrics for program completion, college graduation, wages and job placement.

This is a tremendous opportunity to invest in San Antonio and create generational change while preserving popular programs. Assuage public concerns about aquifer protection, tighten up the messaging around investing in people and promise accountability, and voters will endorse this plan in November.