

# San Antonio City Council, VIA Send Sales Tax Proposals To Voters in November

Texas Public Radio | By [Joey Palacios](#)  
Published August 13, 2020 at 4:18 PM CDT



File photo: San Antonio City Council in September 2019

Joey Palacios / Texas Public Radio

*This story was updated Aug. 13 at 9:15 p.m.*

After approval from the City Council Thursday, San Antonio voters will decide on a temporary sales tax to fund economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic in the form of job training. The city council passed the measure 9-2.

VIA Metropolitan Transit will also send an issue to voters that uses the same sales tax for transportation initiatives, but at a later date.

The sales tax initiative is two-pronged, San Antonio's use of the tax would last four years starting in mid-2021 and then shift over to VIA to fund transportation in perpetuity starting in 2026. Voters will have to approve both items independently on the November ballot.

The city's proposal would train 40,000 job-seekers for new careers. Its focus is for those who have lost work during the pandemic. It would also provide opportunities to complete two- or four-year degrees.

San Antonio Mayor Ron Nirenberg said the workforce development plan could help people who were underemployed before the pandemic even began and those who lost their jobs during it.

"Now in the face of a global pandemic, the world is beginning to understand what so many San Antonio families have known for far too long: a large and growing number of people live on the edge of crisis. One health event, one accident, one lost job away from economic catastrophe," Nirenberg said. "COVID-19 has become that event."

Estimates from the city's economic development department show 154,000 workers in San Antonio have been displaced from their jobs due to the pandemic. About 33,000 are in hospitality and food service, 16,000 in retail and 15,000 in healthcare and social assistance.

The tax would generate about \$38 million per year with the money going towards workforce training, tuition and emergency aid needed by program participants. Business leaders including H-E-B, Rackspace, USAA and Toyota Motor Manufacturing Texas signed their support in a letter on Wednesday.

"Building upon the city's current recovery and resiliency program, which meets the immediate needs of our community, we believe that the proposed workforce training and education plan to connect vulnerable residents to training and education opportunities that increase their ability to secure a stable job and earn higher wages will extend this opportunity to more San Antonians," the letter said.

During the summer, the city council approved a recovery and resiliency plan that provides a similar program like this, but it only lasts a year and uses federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act money.

The majority of the council is in support of the tax initiative.

District 3 Councilwoman Rebecca Viagran said the initiative is more than just an opportunity to recover from COVID-19. It can also change the city's trajectory.

"This can be an investment in our people, in our future, in ourselves, a stronger tomorrow to change the narrative of the past, so let's take it to the voters," she said.

District 4 Councilwoman Adriana Rocha Garcia said six of her family members had died from COVID-19 complications, making note that economic conditions in place before the virus may have set them up for difficulties in battling the virus.

"Six cousins whose early economic circumstances combined with the lack of access to healthy habits at a young age contributed to underlying health conditions that they developed as adults thus complicating their ability to survive this unforgiving virus," she said.

Two councilmen, Clayton Perry of District 10 and Roberto Treviño of District 1 voted against adding the referendum.

Treviño said he felt the stipends and assistance in the proposal wouldn't cover the needs of the people who need the program most — for instance, single mothers who cannot take the time to do job training. He also expressed frustration more was not being done for housing assistance.

"While I understand the long-term impact this plan tends to have, immediate food and shelter needs of our community need to take priority," he said.

Perry said he felt taking the money from what initially funds aquifer protection and creekways would essentially create a new tax because those programs will still need funding.

"I don't feel comfortable about supporting this program at this point with all these questions out there. To me, that's like signing a blank check, 'Here, take that money, I'll trust you to come up with the right answers and make sure this program is sustainable,'" Perry said.

The tax currently exists as a funding mechanism for the Edwards Aquifer Protection Plan and linear creekway projects for hike and bike trails in the city. The tax was first approved by voters in 2000 and has been reauthorized by voters every five years. The aquifer and creekway tax is set to expire this year and will stop collecting funds mid-2021.

City Manager Erik Walsh said there are talks for the San Antonio Water System to take over the funding for the protection program, which is being used to buy easements over the aquifer's recharge zone and protect it from development. Bexar County may take over the creekway program.

During Thursday's council meeting, citizens signed up to offer input, and several supported its use for the aquifer.

Earlier plans for the available sales tax was to use it to fund ConnectSA, a transportation initiative proposed by San Antonio Mayor Ron Nirenberg. However, Nirenberg paused that idea due to the COVID-19 pandemic in June.

The city and VIA were not in agreement on using the tax but arrived at a split compromise last month.

Also on Thursday afternoon, the VIA Metropolitan Transit board of trustees unanimously voted to put a referendum on the ballot for voters to decide on a 1/8th sales tax. Like the city's ballot initiative, it will appear on the November ballot.

The VIA sales tax uses the same allocation as the city's proposal, but not until 2026. When the city is done collecting over four years, it will shift over to the Advance Transportation District and generate about the same amount of money.

VIA officials have long said the bus system is underfunded; VIA gets a half cent sales tax already while other major cities in Texas get a full cent. VIA Board Chair Hope Andrade said if voters approve the additional 1/8th cent, it will help VIA prepare as San Antonio's population grows.

"It begins to address the historic inequities that underfunding transit has created in our city and puts opportunity within everyone's reach to uplift our community," she said.