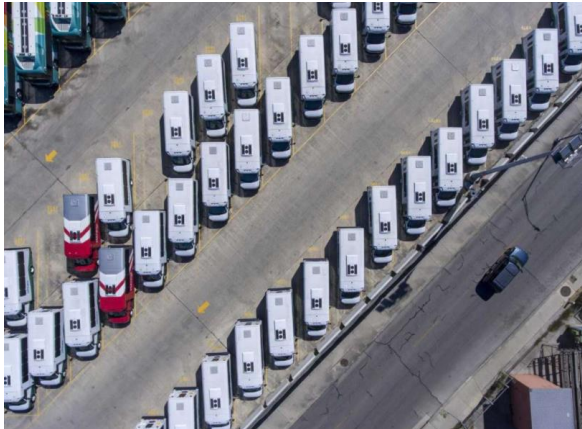


Garcia: VIA's difficult path to an easy election win

Gilbert Garcia - Nov. 8, 2020



There was no suspense Tuesday night in the vote for a public-transit proposition. Photo: William Luther, Staff / Staff

There was no suspense Tuesday night in the vote for a public transit proposition.

The proposition, designed to provide an 1/8-cent sales tax boost to VIA Metropolitan Transit, beginning in five years (after Mayor Ron Nirenberg's workforce development program runs its course), sailed to an easy election win, with nearly 68 percent of the vote.

Getting to that win, however, was anything but easy.

The idea of a public transit sales tax proposition had been championed by Nirenberg for much of his first three years in office.

He recognized that in a city projected to grow by roughly 1 million people over the next two decades, only a proactive infusion of mobility money could slow our descent into a perpetual bottleneck nightmare.

In the 42 years since San Antonio created its public transit agency, it has never given that agency the financial tools needed to fully serve this community. While the other major Texas cities invest a full cent of sales tax revenue into public transit, VIA has scraped by with a half-cent (supplemented since 2004 with an 1/8 cent in Advanced Transportation District revenue).

Since San Antonio is capped out when it comes to its sales tax rate, the only plausible option for Nirenberg was to reallocate tax revenue that had been going to Edwards Aquifer protection and linear creekway parks programs.

Nirenberg spent considerable time late last year and early this year trying to alleviate the concerns of local environmentalists by searching for an alternative way to fund the aquifer program.

Then the COVID-19 pandemic hit and Nirenberg pivoted. He decided to drop the public transit plan and wound up pushing instead for a four-year \$154 million workforce development program to provide job training and education.

While rumors had been flying around for weeks, VIA reps didn't learn until June 2, the day of Nirenberg's annual State of the City speech, that the mayor planned to abandon the public transit proposition.

“Rivers adapt when they encounter obstacles; so we, too, must adapt our plans for the future of San Antonio,” Nirenberg told San Antonians in his virtual address. “That means new investment in our transit system must wait.”

He did not get specific about his plans for that sales tax revenue or a timetable for taking it to voters but spoke of the need for “education and training” and added that he would be “convening a group of community leaders to help us chart the way forward.”

During this period, perfectly on cue, the city released the findings of a report aiming to invalidate VIA’s dire warnings about looming budgetary shortfalls.

A week before the mayor’s address, VIA President and CEO Jeff Arndt told the VIA board that the agency could be looking at a funding shortfall of up to \$126 million over the next five years.

Arndt emphasized that the figure was based on “preliminary” projections and was something of a worst-case scenario. (For example, the projection did not carry the assumption that the city — under its own pandemic-induced financial strain — would continue voluntarily sharing \$10 million a year in Advanced Transportation District funds.)

This approach should have been familiar to city staffers, given the fact that for years we’ve seen municipal budget projections warning the City Council of shortfalls and encouraging belt-tightening measures, only for the city to be miraculously saved months later by higher-than-expected CPS Energy summer revenues.

But the city’s budgetary analysis of VIA, conducted by Chief Financial Officer Ben Gorzell, was used to propagate the message that VIA reps were being deceitful about the agency’s financial challenges. It was an ugly episode.

Under these tense circumstances, VIA trustees did something unusual. They went ahead with plans to call a November election for a public transit proposition.

It was a move made less in defiance of the mayor than in the spirit of trying to broker a compromise. With the help of former Mayor Henry Cisneros, the two sides worked out a plan that allowed workforce development to coexist on the ballot with public transit.

The public transit campaign — orchestrated by local consultants Kelton Morgan and Laura Barberena — was a sprint conducted during a time of social distancing. It required explaining to voters that their taxes wouldn’t go up. It also required an explanation for why VIA wanted voters to approve a proposition that wouldn’t kick in until January 2026.

The simple answer is that by locking in those funds, VIA can engage in long-term planning and leverage that money in seeking federal grants. The proposition will give VIA roughly \$40 million a year in additional funds to serve this community.

The three propositions on the San Antonio ballot — public transit, workforce development and Pre-K 4 SA — all passed by similar margins, and they’ll all attack economic disparity from different angles.

It feels like they were meant to be together on the ballot. But it didn’t happen easily.