

OPINION // EDITORIAL

Editorial: VIA's green line marks starting point for rapid transit in San Antonio

By **Express-News Editorial Board**, *Opinion Staff*
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Passengers board a VIA bus at Centro Plaza. A planned north-south Advanced Rapid Transit corridor could redefine public transportation in San Antonio. Billy Calzada, Staff / San Antonio Express-News

San Antonio is one of the fastest-growing cities in the nation. It also ranks as one of the poorest and most economically segregated.

San Antonio is also the largest city in the nation that lacks any form of true rapid transit (the Primo line does not count).

That last point will change in 2027 when VIA Metropolitan Transit begins service on its green line, the first rapid transit line in our community. It will run between San Antonio International Airport and Southtown. At long last, San Antonio will have a north-south corridor that will quickly move people, regardless of traffic conditions, along San Pedro Avenue between the airport and downtown.



A rendering of VIA's planned green line, which will be the first rapid transit option in San Antonio and could redefine mobility here.

This is not light rail — something San Antonio voters have rejected. But it is just as effective at moving people (and comes at a significantly lower cost). Picture a rubber-tired vehicle that looks like a light rail car, traveling down a dedicated lane free of traffic with station stops along the way. At present, it takes some 90 minutes to travel by bus from the airport to Steves Avenue south of downtown. When the green line is running, that trip will take 45 minutes.

Even better, if a passenger boards at North Star Mall and exits downtown, the trip will take about 20 minutes, VIA officials have said.

This is possible because in 2020 San Antonio voters approved shifting a 1/8 cent sales tax away from Edwards Aquifer protection and greenways. Those projects are now funded through other sources, and the sales tax dollars have been redirected to the city's Ready to Work job-training program, which will shift to VIA in 2026. We'll turn our attention to the jobs program, which has not met expectations, in a future editorial.

For VIA, though, simply dedicating the additional sales tax revenue has opened the door to previously untapped federal funding. VIA is set to receive about \$160 million from the Federal Transit Administration for the green line. It also sets the stage for a second rapid transit line — the silver line — that would link the city's West and East sides while also intersecting with the north-south green line.

VIA President and CEO Jeff Arndt told us the silver line is estimated to cost about \$300 million. VIA is in the early steps of identifying the exact corridor and submitting for FTA funding, but to advance the silver line, VIA will also need local officials to pledge a match for any potential federal funding. Whatever that amount is — Arndt has said \$100 million, but city officials likely have a different,

smaller number in mind — it would be money well spent. There is no time to waste with a potential administration change in 2024.

San Antonio has a legacy of underfunding transit — at an enormous human and social cost. While San Antonio was the first Texas city to create a mass transit authority in 1977, it did so on the cheap. Instead of funding VIA with a full penny, local officials instead opted for a half-cent. This has led to infrequent service over a large area, as well as a lack of federal funding to match visionary projects.

“We went for one half of what we could have gone for (in 1977), for public transportation,” Arndt said. “The other large cities all went for the full penny. That has left us in a position where we receive between 60 percent and 75 percent less revenue every year through local revenue. And that’s part of the reason we’ve been challenged to pursue these large federal grants, because you have to have the money for the local match.”

With the additional sales tax dollars, VIA can now improve service frequency and pursue federal matches for the green and silver lines.

In 2020, before COVID hit, about 4,000 daily riders used bus routes that will be consolidated into the green line. VIA estimates about 7,000 daily riders in 2027 when the line opens, with ridership growing to 13,500 by 2040.

Time will tell about the accuracy of this forecast, but it speaks to the power of transit done right. As San Antonio grows, it’s paramount for the community to embrace rapid mass transit to ease congestion and take drivers off the roads, connect people with employers and overcome economic segregation.

There is also a synergy at play as San Antonio International Airport undergoes a \$2.5 billion expansion that should be completed by 2028 and as local officials consider a stadium district for a new Spurs arena and Missions ballpark. It would make sense to serve a stadium district with rapid transit.

Past is often prologue, but it does not have to be. Rapid transit is overdue for San Antonio, and the green and silver lines have the potential to usher in a new era of mass transit. After waiting so long, let’s go.

Express-News Editorial Board

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