

# San Antonio lays groundwork for downtown-to-airport transit line

by **Andrea Drusch**  
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Wednesday marked the first physical step toward creation of mass transit system in San Antonio — an idea city leaders have been dreaming about for roughly five decades.

Construction on the Advanced Rapid Transit (ART) plan's North-South line, which will run from San Antonio International Airport to the Brooks Transit Center, is expected to begin in January 2025 and be complete by March 2027.

With long-uncertain funding finally in place, VIA Metropolitan Transit officials christened a project office for what will be known as the Green Line on San Pedro Avenue, where the line operate. For now, the office will display maps and models for the public to view and provide a place where residents can ask questions throughout the construction process.

VIA used the occasion to provide a glimpse of what the low-emission rapid transit buses will look like.

A video graphic on the project's new website shows a green bus zipping past cars on San Pedro Avenue, bypassing traffic lights in its red protected lanes. Passengers are shown waiting at a covered bus stop in the median between northbound and southbound traffic lanes, accessed by crosswalk.

Mayor Ron Nirenberg, former Mayor Henry Cisneros and other proponents of the project celebrated the string of local and federal commitments that have aligned, starting with one-eighth-cent sales tax approved by voters in 2020 and ending with an agreement last week between the city and county for how the money will be spent.

In between those accomplishments, the federal government approved a \$1 trillion infrastructure law at the end of 2021, and San Antonio's ART plan received \$158 million in the president's fiscal year 2023 budget.

"It was such a long-term, uncertain revenue forecast. ... We didn't have congressionally appropriated funds, the infrastructure law was a pipe dream," Nirenberg recalled of the project's early outlook in an interview Tuesday. "Now all of that has happened, and we're going to take advantage."

The North-South line is expected to cost \$388 million, up from the \$320 million estimated in 2021, due to rising construction costs, according to VIA.

The projected sales tax revenue has also increased since plans were first approved. It was expected to provide roughly \$38 million per year beginning in 2026 but will likely exceed \$45 million per year.

VIA plans to construct an East-West line, but doesn't have the funding solidified yet. It will apply for federal funding later this summer, VIA President and CEO Jeff Arndt said Wednesday.

### **Dedicated lanes on San Pedro**

ART's North-South route will run primarily on its own dedicated lanes, helping it keep a consistent schedule and move quickly even in heavy traffic.

Plans for the Green Line show 26 stops, spaced roughly a third of a mile apart. The projected ride time from from the airport to Brooks City Base is approximately 45 minutes. Buses would arrive every 10 minutes on weekdays, and every 15 minutes on weekends, according to VIA.

The route is expected to be completed months before the opening of San Antonio International Airport's new terminal. Local leaders hope it also will serve as a commuter line for residents.

"We found during the pandemic that something like half of the riders of buses were people who had no car, work for wages below the minimum wage, and had to be at work. They couldn't work from home," Arndt said.

Eventually, the two ART lines are expected to connect to other rapid transit bus lines throughout the city.



A rendering shows what the Rapid Green Line bus will look like. Credit: Courtesy / VIA Metropolitan Transit

### **Unusual funding structure**

San Antonio has sought unsuccessfully to create a mass transit system for decades, said Cisneros, who pointed to early transit advocates on City Council before he was mayor in the 1980s. More recently a light rail proposal was rejected by voters in 2000, and VIA's 2011 street car plan fell apart.

"We are now on the precipice of finally bringing mass transit to San Antonio, which is a paradigm shift if there has ever been one," Nirenberg said at a City Council meeting last week, where an interlocal agreement affirming the voter-approved sales tax revenue would be used for ART was approved.

That move, though largely procedural, was one of many steps needed to facilitate an unusual funding structure that has made ART possible.

For example, VIA brought on a former acting administrator of the Federal Transit Administration to help advise on the grant process last year and learned an interlocal agreement was needed to shore up the local funding source.

The ART project leverages the one-eighth-cent sales tax to qualify for federal funding, which could cover up to 60% of the project's costs. So far the federal government has agreed to cover 49% of the project, but the city is asking for more.

Though that sales tax revenue doesn't come to the project until 2026, VIA used its federal pandemic relief money to fund some day-to-day operations, allowing the organization to stockpile funds for ART's planning and early stages.

That savings will also allow VIA to pursue a low-interest loan from the federal Department of Transportation to provide local funding until the sales tax money kicks in. Loans from the DOT's Transportation Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act don't have to be repaid until after the project is complete.

"Prior to the pandemic, the conversation about infrastructure was really, can we dream about being in this moment right now?" Nirenberg said Wednesday.



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