



Hop on the Green Line: How VIA's new rapid bus route will operate

 by **Andrea Drusch**
October 29, 2023



In the early 1970s, San Antonio leaders had a vision for mass transit. To meet the needs of a growing city, they envisioned a bus system far grander than what the city could afford based on rider fares and successfully lobbied the Legislature to create the state's first metropolitan transit agency.

Roughly five decades later, San Antonio is still on the path to achieving an affordable mass transit system, after many setbacks along the way.

VIA Metropolitan Transit plans to break ground in mid-2024 on the north-south Advanced Rapid Transit (ART) line, which VIA touts as offering riders a commuting option with speed and frequency comparable to a light rail line.

The 12-mile, north-south route, known as the Green Line, will connect the San Antonio International Airport to downtown and continue on to the Spanish Colonial missions. It's expected to be operational by August 2027.

Plans for an east-west route, known as the Silver Line, show pre-construction work could begin in 2025 with service opening as early as 2029. VIA projects it could break ground in 2027, depending on the city's ability to line up a local funding source needed to compete for the federal money driving both projects.

"When you get your head around the idea of what it means to have transit that's available, what it means is people can walk out of their house, get on your transit system, and easily get to their destination," VIA President and CEO Jeff Arndt said at the June opening of a project office for the Green Line. "It's critical to education. It's critical to health care. It's critical for development. It's just the right thing to do."

But city leaders have long struggled to make that case to voters.

In 1977, San Antonio was the first Texas city to approve sales tax for transit, designating a half-cent to create the agency now known as VIA. Other large cities followed the move by approving a full cent sales tax, allowing them to fuel major transit projects, while San Antonio lagged in both funding and execution.

San Antonio voters rejected a quarter-cent sales tax for a light rail proposal in 2000. In 2014 a downtown street car project fell apart after five years of work, controversy and acrimony. The result was a City Charter amendment requiring a public vote on any future rail projects.

By contrast, the ART system relies on a surprisingly small local investment.

The first segment was made possible by a windfall of pandemic relief money for VIA, combined with a voter-approved one-eighth-cent sales tax for transit that starts in 2026. The agency has used some of its \$270 million in pandemic relief to move the project along before the tax increment funding kicks in, while the approval of a local match allowed VIA to leverage federal money for the rest.

"It's a full-circle moment," Arndt said. "I truly believe we are at a turning point for mobility in our city and region."

Built for speed

Long popular in Latin America, bus rapid transit systems have grown in popularity as an alternative to light rail in the U.S. They're much cheaper to construct and move faster than a regular bus system, expanding the universe of potential customers.

"If you're looking at bang for the buck, this is the way to do it," Bill Lindeke, an urban studies lecturer at the University of Minnesota, told Colorado Public Radio.

Minneapolis and St. Paul share three such lines and plan to add more, while Denver is planning its own system.

"If you're a white collar [worker] coming out of work and want to get home, you know [the bus is] going to be there, and it's going to come with some frequency," Arndt said. "So it changes the whole mindset, the whole dynamic of who uses transit."

To achieve that speed and reliability, San Antonio's ART lines are expected to run on dedicated lanes for at least half the route — a requirement for the federal grants they rely on.

VIA's Green Line

The overall estimated cost for the Green Line Advanced Rapid Transit bus line is \$446.3 million. Here's the funding breakdown:

- \$269.2 million in federal funds sought
- \$87.8 million in federal loans
- \$89.3 million in local funds

In addition, the project would require \$32.2 million in contingency funding and \$23.3 million in finance charges.



An IndyGo Advanced Rapid Transit bus at a station in an area with dedicated northbound and southbound bus lanes in Indianapolis. Credit: AJ Mast for the San Antonio Report

The Green Line is expected to open at the same time major airport renovations are wrapping up in 2027.

Competing interests

The airport-to-downtown connection will represent a significant step forward in a region where transportation advancements have long prioritized car traffic.

The Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) has sparred with the city on multiple plans for multimodal corridors that would take traffic lanes away from cars, and reversed plans to turn over some state highways where the city wanted to reduce the number of lanes.

Notably, the Green Line buses must run alongside regular traffic when passing under highways, where the state retains the right-of-way.

“On the city roads ... they can go ahead and reduce lanes, it’s their street, it’s their prerogative,” said Gina Gallegos, TxDOT’s San Antonio District engineer. “However, on our state system, we cannot reduce capacity. ... There is just a volume of traffic that is traveling underneath for Interstate 10 heading towards the airport.”

Manjiri Akalkotkar, vice president of program delivery at VIA, said the agency works closely with other regional transportation entities, such as the Alamo Area Metropolitan Planning Organization, to ensure the ART is a “piece of a larger puzzle.”

The city has identified seven corridors it believes are ripe for growth, and VIA’s long-range plan shows them connected by ART and other higher-speed bus routes by 2040.

“If you have a good, robust network of frequent, reliable service, [combined with] underlying transit service which feeds into it, then you have mobility across our service area,” said Akalkotkar, who consulted on India’s first BRT system and taught urban transportation at CEPT University in India, with a focus on bus rapid transit system planning and operations.

“That was the big picture vision,” she said. “We are chipping away a little bit with whatever funding is available.”

San Antonio leaders have found this new vision aligning closely with that of the Biden administration, which has committed once-in-a-generation funding for infrastructure projects.

The Federal Transit Administration’s Capital Investment Grants program has existed for decades, but the 2021 Bipartisan Infrastructure Law updated the criteria to support projects that provide access to employment, education, health care and connecting transit. FTA leaders have visited the ART project areas and encouraged San Antonio to pursue federal funding.

How the Green Line will operate

The concept behind the Green Line is similar to bus rapid transit lines in cities such as Albuquerque, Cleveland and Indianapolis. Earlier this year, Houston's public transit system approved a route for a \$1.56 billion bus rapid transit project covering more than 25 miles in the city's University Corridor.

Here's how the Green Line will work: On wide portions of the north-south route along San Pedro Avenue, buses will have their own center-running lanes and boarding stations. In places where the existing road is too narrow, the buses will use the outermost traffic lanes, and passengers will board from stations located along the curb.

ART will use traffic signal optimization to avoid red lights and to rejoin regular traffic when necessary, according to VIA's graphic representation.



A rendering shows a Green Line bus station near North Star Mall and Loop 410. Credit: Courtesy / VIA Metropolitan Transit

The project is about to enter the final design phase, which will determine details like how the bus lanes will be marked and whether they will have physical barriers separating them from regular traffic.

To reduce stop times, riders are expected to pay for the fare in advance, possibly by mobile app. No ticket will be required to board. Raised boarding platforms also will minimize stop times, allowing buses to run at more frequent, predictable intervals.

The Green Line will be served by 17 new low- or no-emission vehicles. Buses are expected to arrive every 10 minutes on weekdays and 15 minutes on weekends.

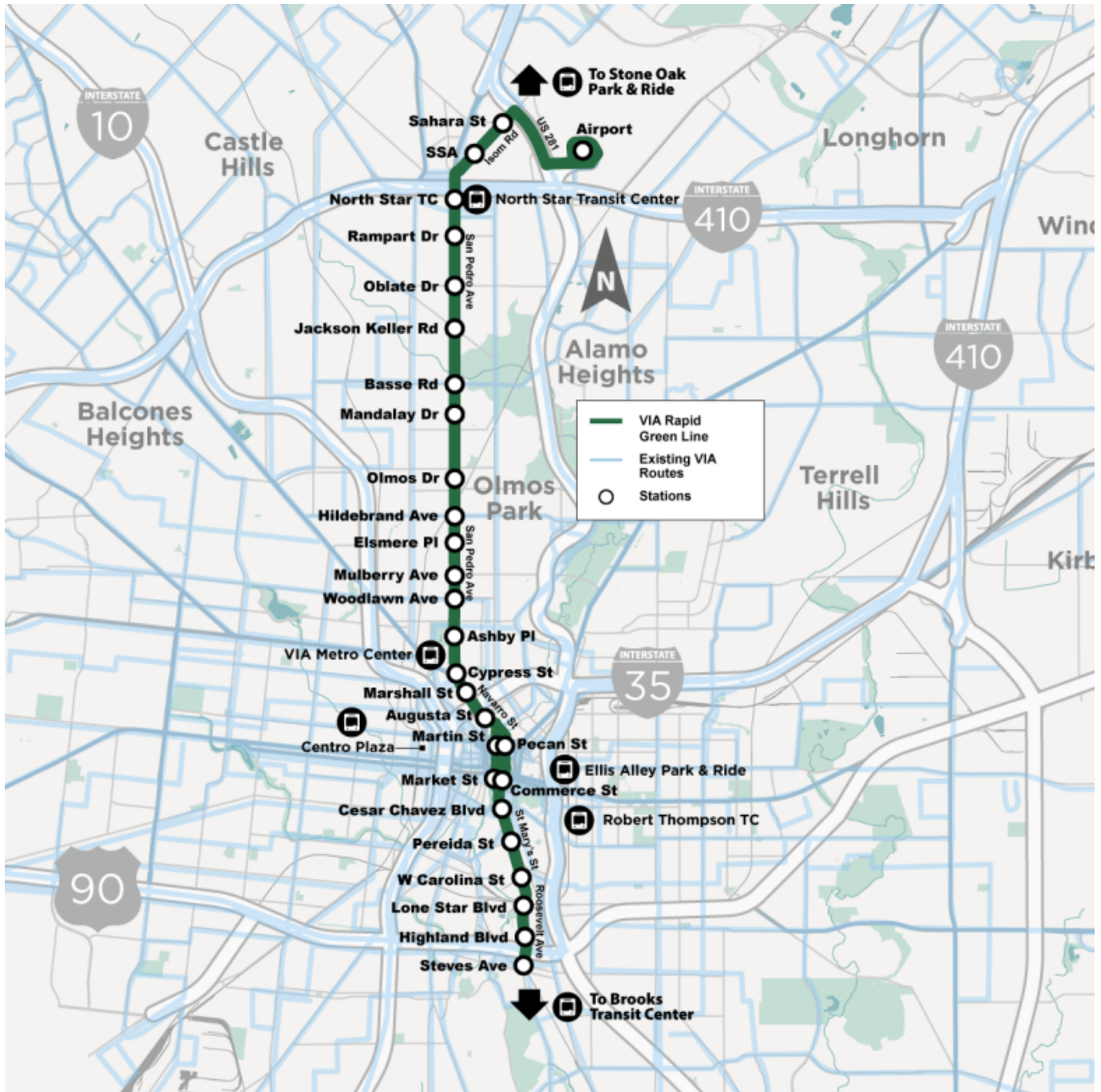


An aerial view facing South on San Pedro Avenue, where VIA's Advanced Rapid Transit line would have dedicated lanes and traffic signals. Credit: Scott Ball / San Antonio Report

Construction of the line will entail 26 new bus stations and 41 new platforms.

Coming from the north, buses will pick up passengers at the airport park-and-ride, travel along Isom Road, then join San Pedro Avenue. Downtown, the route will split between North St. Mary's Street and Navarro Street using transit-only and business access lanes that have existed for decades and are currently marked with diamonds.

Buses headed north and south will meet again on South St. Mary's Street starting at East Nueva Street. The southbound route then moves to Roosevelt Avenue starting at Mission Avenue, and service ends at Steves Avenue.



The Green Line route connects passengers to the San Antonio International Airport, downtown and the Spanish Colonial missions along with neighborhoods and businesses in-between. Credit: Courtesy / VIA Metropolitan Transit

Throughout construction of the ART lines, all roads are expected to remain open to traffic, according to VIA. When construction is complete, both bus and regular traffic lanes will be resurfaced.

The project also includes funding to build sidewalks where there are none along the route, as well as upgrade intersections, allowing for safer pedestrian crossing and more efficient car travel through the corridor.

Silver Line

Details of an east-west line are far less clear.

A presentation to the City Council's Transportation and Infrastructure Committee on Oct. 17 said the Silver Line is expected to run 7.3 miles, including dedicated lanes and 18 new stations.

While the route is subject to change, Arndt said VIA is currently looking at a route that begins on North Gen. McMullen Drive on the West Side and runs along West Commerce Street and East Houston Street to the Frost Bank Center on the East Side. That route crosses several train tracks, causing potential delays for a rapid bus system.

The FTA gave VIA an \$8.1 million grant to develop plans.

Though the city hasn't identified a local funding source to pursue further funding from the agency, VIA has started the process of getting required environmental approvals and is drafting station layouts.

VIA estimates the Silver Line will cost roughly \$289.2 million, according to the presentation. Of that, local funds are expected to account for \$100.5 million.

"All we've got to do is make sure we dot the end of the sentence on the east-west and we are ready to go, shovels in the ground," Mayor Ron Nirenberg said at a June press conference.

This article has been updated to clarify VIA's timeline for an east-west Silver Line.



ANDREA DRUSCH

Andrea Drusch writes about local government for the San Antonio Report. She's covered politics in Washington, D.C., and Texas for the Fort Worth Star-Telegram, National Journal and Politico.