

San Antonio's Silver Line gets nod of approval from Biden Administration

by **Andrea Drusch**
March 11, 2024



Residents provide feedback and ask questions of VIA staff regarding the Advanced Rapid Transit (ART) Silver Line during a public meeting at The Little Carver in January. The new transit system is designed to connect San Antonians north to south via the Green Line and west to east via the Silver Line. Credit: Bria Woods / San Antonio Report

Local leaders still haven't lined up their portion of the funding for a planned east-west bus rapid transit line, but the project still made the White House's list of top transit projects it hopes to fund in the 2025 fiscal year.

The federal government has already committed money to help VIA Metropolitan Transit construct a north-south route known as the Green Line, which will run from the San Antonio International Airport to the Spanish Colonial missions, and is expected to be operational by fall of 2027.

The east-west route, known as the Silver Line, is expected to run 7.3 miles beginning on North Gen. McMullen Drive on the West Side and ending at the Frost Bank Center on the East Side.

The U.S. Department of Transportation is recommending \$134.7 million for the Silver Line in President Joe Biden's asks from Congress for the 2025 fiscal year, DOT said in a statement Monday. It also wants to increase its investment in the Green Line, and is recommending another \$109.7 million for that project.

The two routes were among 14 transit projects across the country chosen for consideration by the White House — most of which are rail.

Local leaders have tried and failed repeatedly to bring rail to San Antonio, but eventually settled on bus rapid transit (BRT) as a cheaper alternative.

Many transportation experts remain skeptical about how transformative BRT will be for the city, since it doesn't typically bring the same type of development investments as rail. San Antonio's routes will use a combination of shared and designated lanes, meaning they can also be subject to regular traffic congestion.

Still, the Biden Administration has been keen on San Antonio's Green and Silver lines for their potential to connect underserved residents to jobs, education and other transit. In addition to funding their construction, the Federal Transit Administration is paying for VIA to craft a zoning plan that would lay the groundwork for denser housing and businesses along the Green Line on the San Pedro Avenue corridor.

"Public transportation connects people to jobs, school, family, and more — and when transit reaches more people and communities, its impact is even greater," said U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg in a statement announcing the projects' selection.

DOT's statement says the Silver Line will serve "a corridor with a high proportion of low-income and zero-car households, older adults, people with disabilities and minority groups. It includes 5.1 miles of dedicated transit lanes, stations, and the purchase of low- or no-emission vehicles."

Plans for the Silver Line were crafted through an \$8.1 million grant the FTA had already given to VIA.

The hunt for local funds

Despite enthusiasm from the federal government, local leaders have historically had a hard time securing funding for transit in San Antonio.

The Green Line's local match was made possible by combining some of VIA's federal pandemic relief with the promise of a one-eighth cent sales tax revenue that voters approved in 2020, which the agency won't start receiving until 2026.

Local funding for the Silver Line has remained uncertain, but one likely potential partner is Bexar County, which owns the Frost Bank Center, where the east-west route could end.



A rendering shows a VIA Rapid Green Line bus at a future stop along San Pedro Avenue. Credit: Courtesy VIA Metropolitan Transit

The Spurs currently play home games at the Frost Bank Center and have nearly a decade left on their lease, but Bexar County Judge Peter Sakai and other local officials already anticipate needing to transform the East Side if the team leaves for a new downtown arena.

In a December interview with the San Antonio Report, Sakai said, “I have committed the county to participate with the city and VIA on what they call Advanced Rapid Transit.”

“I’m asking that if there should be a move away from the Frost Bank Center ... that [the Spurs] have to protect the county’s investment, and that includes that whole area on the East Side,” Sakai said. “I made it very clear that we need to make sure we have a strategy for economic development in that area.”

It’s unclear how much money the county would contribute and what other entities could be involved.

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



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.