

NEWS

Will Bexar County kick in \$101 million for a VIA rapid transit line in San Antonio?

By **Megan Rodriguez**, Staff writer
May 22, 2024



People wait for their bus at a VIA bus stop on East Fredericksburg Road in San Antonio, Texas, Feb. 4, 2020.
Josie Norris, The San Antonio Express-News / Staff Photographer

Work on two rapid transit bus routes in San Antonio is underway, but VIA Metropolitan Transit is still trying to line up \$101 million so it can secure large federal grants for one of those lines.

VIA Metropolitan Transit is slated to receive a total of \$267.8 million from the Biden administration for its planned Green Line along San Pedro Avenue and another \$142.9 million for the Silver Line on Commerce and Houston streets.

But VIA officials can't get their hands on the Federal Transit Administration funds for the Silver Line until local government steps up with a \$101 million match — and for that they're looking to Bexar County. Jon Gary Herrera, VIA's senior vice president of public engagement, said he expects County Judge Peter Sakai and the county's four commissioners to vote on the allocation within the next two months.

But county spokeswoman Monica Ramos said, "no commitment has been made at this time," and that talks with VIA are ongoing. Ramos said it is too soon to know where county leaders would find money for the project.

Construction of the Silver Line is expected to begin in 2027, with service launching in 2029.

Its east-west route will be 7 miles end to end and cost about \$290 million. The line — which will run from the Frost Bank Center on the East Side to just past Our Lady of the Lake University on the West Side — will include 18 new stations.

Advanced rapid transit speeds up bus service by designating bus-only lanes, relying on off-board fare collection for faster boarding and building stations spaced farther apart than on regular bus lines. Riders also will have shorter wait times.

VIA will purchase 13 new buses for the Silver Line.

Cost of Green Line grows

The price tag for the north-south Green Line has ballooned over the last two years. In 2022, VIA estimated the cost at \$320 million but now expects it to reach \$446.3 million. Inflation is largely to blame, but VIA officials also say they have a better grasp of the costs as the design work for line nears completion.

Construction of the Green Line is expected to begin in 2025. It will be just under 12 miles long and have 26 new stations along the route. VIA is purchasing 17 new low-emission buses for the route.

The north-south line will replace the two existing bus routes along San Pedro Avenue, connecting San Antonio International Airport to downtown, Roosevelt Park and Mission Concepción on the near South Side beginning in 2027. It will run larger buses at a higher frequency in dedicated lanes, with 10 to 15 minutes between buses compared to the current 20 to 30 minutes.

The new buses will drive down the middle of San Pedro on its northern stretch where it is now six lanes wide, cutting down the driving lanes for other vehicles in those areas to four lanes. They'll then will move over to a curbed lane when the avenue narrows to four lanes closer to downtown.

Both of the planned rapid transit lines have received two rounds of federal funding. In March, the Federal Transit Administration said the two lines would be among 14 other major transit construction projects to receive grants from a \$4 billion pot.

VIA will be in a stronger position to cover costs related to the lines' development in two years, thanks to a sales tax that San Antonio voters approved in 2020.

In 2026, the agency will begin receiving revenue from the 1/8-cent sales tax, which currently goes to the city of San Antonio's Ready to Work job-training program.

VIA's current budget, which is partly funded with a a 5/8-cent sales tax, is \$391 million.



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