

NEWS

VIA's San Pedro rapid bus line is moving forward, and the cost is going up

By **Megan Rodriguez**, Staff writer
Updated June 21, 2023 4:49 p.m.



People wait for their bus at a VIA bus stop on East Fredericksburg Road in 2020. VIA's plans for a city-wide "advanced rapid transit" system featuring more buses running at shorter intervals on dedicated lanes have cleared a federal funding milestone this week.

Josie Norris, The San Antonio Express-News / Staff Photographer

Work on a faster bus line along San Pedro Avenue is on track, but inflation is driving up the cost — from about \$320 million to an estimated \$388 million.

VIA Metropolitan Transit's north-south advanced rapid transit line will replace the two existing bus routes along San Pedro 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.

In addition to inflation, the cost estimate has increased because the bus agency is further along in its design work — and has a firmer grasp of the costs — than when it made the \$320 million projection last year, according to Manjiri Akalkotkar, vice president of program delivery at VIA.

VIA is hoping the Biden administration will cover 60 percent of the project's \$388 million total. The Federal Transit Administration so far has approved \$158 million for the project.

VIA will also get a boost from additional sales tax revenue that San Antonio voters approved in 2020.

The agency's annual budget is funded in part by local sales tax revenue. It receives a 5/8-cent sales tax to fund its services. In 2026, it will receive money from another 1/8 cent sale tax, which is currently going to the city of San Antonio's Ready to Work job-training program.

VIA's current budget is \$407 million, including \$274 million for operating expenses.

In 2020, the new sales tax was expected to generate \$40 million for VIA. Now the estimate is \$49 million, and Jon Gary Herrera, VIA's senior vice president of public engagement, expects it continue to increase.

Construction on the San Pedro Avenue project is slated to begin in early 2025.

"I think this can be really transformative for a city," said District 6 Councilwoman Melissa Cabello Havrda, chairwoman of the council's Transportation and Mobility Committee.

On Thursday, the City Council will vote on two interlocal agreements related to the rapid-bus route along San Pedro Avenue.

The line will run along nearly 12 miles of San Pedro, connecting San Antonio International Airport to downtown, Roosevelt Park and Mission Concepción on the near South Side.

"This thing is really built for speed, to take a term out of 'Top Gun' here," Herrera said. "Everything that is technical about it is intended to reduce travel time."

VIA plans to purchase 17 buses for the line, many of which will be electric.

The transit agency also is looking to build an east-west rapid transit route along Commerce and Houston streets.



Megan Rodriguez
REPORTER

Megan Rodriguez covers local government and politics for the San Antonio Express-News. Email She can be reached at megan.rodriguez@express-news.net.