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The funding from the Federal Transit Administration will pay for the bulk of the 10.4-mile route, known as the Green Line.

By **Richard Webner**, Staff writer

Dec 18, 2024

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A VIA Transit bus travels north along San Pedro Avenue on Oct. 17. VIA has landed a grant from the Federal Transit Administration to pay for the bulk of the new Green Line rapid bus route.

Sam Owens/San Antonio Express-News



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VIA secures \$268 million federal grant for rapid bus route

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Local leaders have landed a \$268 million federal grant to help pay for the next generation of San Antonio's public transit system: a rapid bus route running from the South Side to the airport.



On Wednesday, VIA Metropolitan Transit signed a grant agreement with the Federal Transit Administration for the grant, which will fund the bulk of the 10.4-mile route, known as the Green Line.

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The Green Line's plans call for buses to run every 10 minutes on weekdays, offering a rapidity of service that does not currently exist in San Antonio. For much of the route,

the buses will have their own lanes, so they will not get snarled in traffic, and signals will be programmed to keep them moving at intersections.

The hope is that the speedier service on the Green Line, as well as on a sister east-west route known as the Silver Line, will lead motorists to ditch their cars for the bus — fulfilling VIA's 1980s-era slogan by making it “easy when you take the bus.”

The grant is the largest federal investment VIA has received in its history, the agency said.

Big dreams for bus routes

Along with reducing traffic while the local population continues to boom, the rapid routes are intended to reduce stress and save time for residents who rely on buses in their daily lives, Mayor Ron Nirenberg said.

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Speaking during a Wednesday ceremony outside VIA's transit hub on San Pedro Avenue — which will serve as the spine for much of the Green Line — Nirenberg said the project offers "mobility, in the broadest sense. Not just moving people physically, but moving them socioeconomically."

He described the rapid bus line as part of an effort to “envision a more equitable San Antonio tomorrow.”

Federal Transit Administration Deputy Administrator Veronica Vanterpool said 60% of VIA's riders use its services to get to work, and 15% don't have a car in their household.

VIA plans to begin construction next year and to have the route running by late 2027.

Along with designated lanes and new stops — designed so that riders will pay before hopping on, reducing the amount of time the buses are stopped — the construction will include 7.3 miles of new or repaired sidewalks, 13 new signalized pedestrian crossings and 151 new or replaced stormwater drains, according to information supplied by VIA.

The total budget is \$480.8 million. VIA plans to contribute \$54.1 million, which it will be able to raise thanks to a ballot measure that voters approved in 2020 redirecting a 1/8-cent sales tax to the agency starting in 2026.

The Advanced Transportation District — a taxing entity that has the same board as VIA – will raise \$153.7 million by issuing revenue bonds.

The route will stretch from Interstate 10 near the vacant Lone Star Brewery through downtown all the way to San Antonio International Airport north of Loop 410.

More frequent service

VIA has based its growth strategy on offering more frequent service. Though the agency's ridership has grown since the depth of the Covid-19 pandemic — from a low of 23.3 million in fiscal year 2021 to 27 million in 2023 — it is still far below where it was a decade ago, mirroring a trend seen in other transit agencies in the Lone Star State. In fiscal year 2013, VIA reported nearly 46.1 million riders, according to data from the state's annual Texas Transit Statistics report.

In past interviews, VIA representatives have attributed the ridership decline since 2013 in part to the difficulty the agency has had in hiring enough drivers after a rash of retirements during the pandemic. On Wednesday, VIA spokesman Josh Baugh said the agency doesn't expect to have trouble hiring drivers for the Green Line because it will be able to use drivers from routes the Green Line is replacing.

Over the past decade or so, VIA has embraced the idea of "bus rapid transit" routes, also known as "advanced rapid transit," after local leaders failed in yet another effort to build a light rail system. "Bus rapid transit" routes have recently been implemented in other U.S. cities such as Indianapolis and Madison, Wisconsin. Austin is now building two of them.

On Wednesday, Vanterpool described “bus rapid transit” as being a policy focus of the Federal Transit Administration under the administration of President Joe Biden.

"A lot of communities automatically think of rail as synonymous with public transportation, but here in the United States we're using our roadways, built to support a car culture, to create a new, cost-efficient way for people to get around, and so attract a new generation of riders," she said.

The Silver Line — set to run from Our Lady of the Lake University on the West Side through downtown to the East Side’s Frost Bank Center — is about two years out from getting its own federal grant locked down, said Jeffrey Arndt, VIA’s president and CEO. In August, the Bexar County Commissioners Court committed to providing the necessary \$100 million local match.

Arndt said the reelection of President Donald Trump isn't expected to have any impact on the funding. Vanterpool, a political appointee, said on Wednesday that she would be leaving her job with Biden’s departure. Arndt is preparing to leave VIA on Jan. 4, to be replaced by Jon Gary Herrera, currently the senior vice president of public engagement.

Some of the ongoing “bus rapid transit” projects across the U.S. were launched in the first Trump administration.

"Historically, transportation has been a nonpartisan issue," Arndt said. "There are investments of this sort in all cities and states across the nation, and therefore both D's and R's and I's and whoever else all have projects that are of interest to them. I feel like the program is solid, and that project is solid, so I'm not concerned."



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Dec 18, 2024



Richard Webner

REPORTER



Richard Webner has returned to the Express-News to cover the San Antonio region's transportation issues. During his first stint, he worked on the business desk, covering the retail and tourism sectors, real estate and downtown development. He earned a graduate degree in journalism from the University of Missouri and an undergraduate degree in history from Northwestern University.

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