

# San Antonio Express-News

## Greg Jefferson: Debate over S.A. stimulus money a battle between have-nots

Greg Jefferson, June 5, 2020 Updated: June 5, 2020 12:36 p.m.

If you banned these words from City Hall — resources, opportunities, inclusion, input, feedback, community engagement and equity — the place would go silent.

Politicians and bureaucrats love these words because they sound clean and wholesome, like a cool mist on a hot, sweaty day.

They float grandly above what they're actually referring to: namely taxpayers' money and the fights over how to divvy it up. The questions they generally gloss over include: Did you work out a deal behind closed doors? If so, did you at least give the preordained losers a chance to make their case?

The word mist at Thursday's City Council meeting was heavier than usual because officials were deciding how to spend a huge slice of the \$270 million in federal bailout funds the city's receiving. A ton was at stake, and Assistant City Manager Colleen Bridger used every word in the above-mentioned canon to lay out a \$191-million rescue plan.

Boiling underneath her presentation wasn't the usual conflict between the haves and have-nots — say, between developers seeking public giveaways and environmentalists or community groups resisting them. This one was between the have-nots and other have-nots.

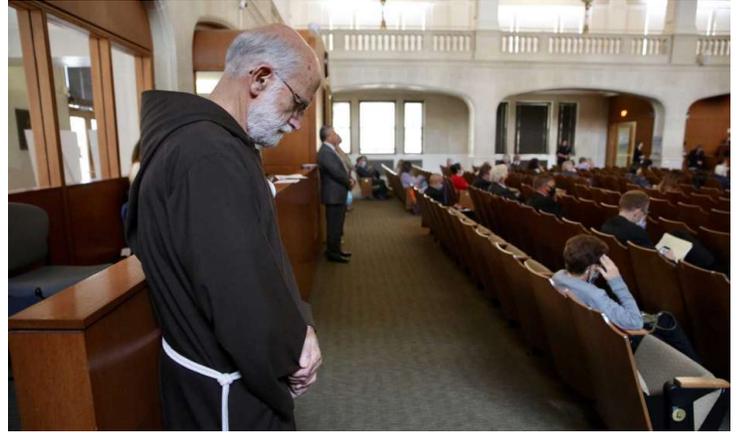
The grassroots organization **COPS-Metro**, which learned how to work politicians decades ago, championed a training program for unemployed workers to create what it calls a "better jobs economy." The more aggressive Texas Organizing Project — remember its tenacity in the battle for paid sick leave? — and other advocates for low-income renters and homeowners sought more money to at least keep the destitute in their homes.

And they resented what they saw as COPS-Metro's insider status. Founded in 1974, COPS-Metro dreamed up the job-training program Project QUEST, which receives city funding annually and will almost certainly receive a share of the stimulus dollars. It rigorously defends the program against the occasional threat of city budget cuts, and it almost always wins. That's because it's rooted in church parishes across the East and West sides, and few council members — especially those representing poorer districts — want to get on the group's bad side.

None of city staff's soothing words Thursday could cover up the dispute between the two camps, fueled as it was by their respective constituents' economic anxieties. Anger over the murder of George Floyd and the lack of police reform in San Antonio — protesters at several points disrupted the council meeting — heightened the tension.

"We need to balance emerging and long-term needs," TOP executive director Michelle Tremillo said to council members. "In the past, you haven't thought talking with one community organization was enough." Her group and its allies wanted to postpone the vote for a week so they could weigh in.

That didn't happen.



*Fr. Bill Kraus prays as San Antonio city council members pause their meeting in silence for 8 min and 46 seconds in honor of George Floyd, on Thursday, June 4, 2020. Photo: Bob Owen, Staff / San Antonio Express-News*

By a 10-1 vote, City Council approved the COPS-Metro-backed plan, the aim of which is to help San Antonio residents recover from the economic disaster that's spun out of the COVID-19 pandemic. It included \$75 million to put 10,000 out-of-work San Antonians into training for jobs that, in most cases, would pay more than the ones from which they were laid off.

Most of the money, \$48 million, will pay for weekly \$450 stipends for trainees to cover living expenses while they're attending classes, mostly at Alamo Colleges campuses.

Another \$10 million will help pay for child care for an estimated 4,000 kids while their parents undergo training.

Details of how this program would actually work are scant, and the question looms: When these trainees finish up, will the jobs they've worked toward be available? (We'll see. A lot of the training will be for work in two of the city's growth industries, health care and cybersecurity.)

Just a few months ago, these concerns would have been deal killers. Come to think of it, no one would have dreamed of bringing up such a costly and audacious plan a few months ago.

But we're in an economic crisis, and city officials have to move quickly. About 129,000 people filed jobless claims between mid-March and May 23, and the area's unemployment rate is nearly 14 percent.

At a time like this, we have to roll with policy improvisation.

And then there's this: A massive retraining program is a chance to start equipping San Antonio workers with the skills they need to break out of the low-wage service jobs that have traditionally dominated the local economy.

That was one of COPS-Metro's objectives as it lobbied council members and Mayor Ron Nirenberg in the run-up to Thursday's vote.

"This \$75 million investment is the first step in San Antonio becoming a city where better jobs and living wages are the norm," COPS-Metro leaders said in a statement after the vote.

Probably true... Hopefully true?

Either way, the catch is that there's a lot of fear and uncertainty in a lot of households *right now*, with landlords once again free to evict tenants who've fallen behind on rent. A state moratorium on evictions expired May 18.

It's important to note that another part of the city's rescue plan doubled the pot of money for rent and mortgage payment assistance, from \$25 million to \$50 million. Will that be enough? No one really knows.

Kenny Wilson, CEO of the Haven for Hope campus for the homeless, thanked City Council for the boost. While he supported the plan, he was clearly nervous about what's ahead — a potential surge of homeless San Antonians.

"Even before COVID, we were full at 1,700 people," said Wilson, former regional head of Bank of America and one-time chairman of the San Antonio Chamber of Commerce. "We have concerns about the quantity that's coming."

Skills training for unemployed workers now is crucial, but there's no way to talk around, or blur, the specter that's alarming Wilson.