

'Time is of the Essence': Council OKs \$191M COVID-19 Recovery Spending Plan

by Iris Dimmick - June 4, 2020

San Antonio City Council approved Thursday a [\\$191 million local recovery plan](#) that will fund workforce training to stabilize workers and the economy during and after the coronavirus pandemic, housing assistance, grants for small businesses, and the expansion of internet access to assist distance learning.

Roughly two dozen people, including representatives from the Texas Organizing Projects and Esperanza Peace and Justice Center, asked City Council to delay its vote at least one week so more public input could be gathered on the spending plan.



About \$50 million of the City's coronavirus relief package will go toward rental and mortgage assistance. Credit: Scott Ball / Rivard Report

[COPS/Metro Alliance](#), a coalition of congregations, schools, and other community groups, worked closely with the City and Alamo Colleges District on the plan.

Council voted 10-1 to approve the measure, with Councilman Clayton Perry (D10) casting the lone vote against. He agreed that more time was needed and said small businesses should be getting more support.

“We’ve identified the four major pillars of our ... community relief and resilience plan that goes beyond simply the health aspects and the health response to the pandemic,” Mayor Ron Nirenberg said. “The work though has only just begun. ... Council and the community will begin engaging in the implementation process.”

The recently re-established [City Council committees](#) will refine details of the plan this month with an accelerated timeline so the City can start signing contracts with partner agencies and start work on July 1, officials said.

“I think time is of the essence,” Councilwoman Rebecca Viagran (D3) said. “We’re still going to have public input throughout the month of June.”

While Thursday's vote sets the budget for each pillar of the plan (housing, small businesses, workforce development, and digital divide), the spending plan can adjust to changing conditions or unsatisfactory results, City Manager Erik Walsh said.

"We're going to need to track the progress and the financial aspects of this on a monthly basis," Walsh said. "I do not want to be in the position ... where we are not spending the money that's been made available to us. If we need to adjust, then we would have to move from one column to the other."

The recovery plan includes \$75 million in workforce development programming, which includes \$10 million to provide child care for essential workers. It offers \$50.5 million in housing assistance, including nearly \$28 million for rental and mortgage payments and \$4 million for direct cash to low-income residents. The plan also includes \$38 million for small-business support, including \$27 million for small-business grants, and more than \$27 million to provide Wi-Fi networks, technology, and other infrastructure to connect students to the internet.

Since City staff presented a draft of the plan last week, \$5 million was moved from the workforce development budget to small-business support based on Council feedback. This money will be used to develop on-the-job training stipends for 1,000 people, said Assistant City Manager Colleen Bridger.

The recovery plan took into account several reports developed with community input (on poverty, domestic violence, etc.) and five working groups established to coordinate response efforts amid the pandemic, Bridger said.

Given that the plan is flexible, there's no reason for delay, because the funding from the federal government must be spent by Dec. 31, Councilman Manny Pelaez (D8) said. "Delaying this item delays the start date for people who are going to be training for their jobs."

In the early weeks after thousands of people lost their jobs as local stay-at-home orders closed hundreds of businesses, COPS/Metro found through its community network that rent and mortgage payment assistance was the critical first step.

Organizers worked with City staff, Bexar County officials, and the office of Councilman Roberto Treviño (D1) to increase the City's housing assistance program 30-fold to nearly \$30 million.

"Now as we help our families fill out the application [for that assistance], we are hearing a different story," Father John Raharjo, a COPS/Metro leader and the pastor of St. Patrick Catholic Church in the Government Hill Neighborhood. "People are saying, 'Thank you for the assistance. Can you help me find a job?' Our parishioners and neighbors do not want to stand in the bread line. They want the dignity of a job that pays a decent wage with a career path."

Project Quest – which was established by COPS/Metro – Alamo Colleges District, SA Works, BioMedSA, Cyber Security San Antonio, and several other organizations will be working on the workforce development element of the plan: scaling up existing programs and developing new ones.

A detailed overview of the plan and its partners can be downloaded [here](#).

“There has been no meaningful community input process to develop this plan,” said Michelle Tremillo, executive director of Texas Organizing Project, which led the movement to establish a now-defunct paid sick leave ordinance in San Antonio. “In the past, you haven’t thought that input from one community organization was enough.”

The process for the paid sick leave ordinance required a commission and several input meetings, Tremillo told Council. “You decided you need zero public hearings and apparently no longer need all stakeholders at the table” this time.

This plan was developed “behind closed doors,” said Graciela Sanchez, executive director of Esperanza. The nonprofit and the artists it supports rely heavily on funding from the City – which stopped paying its contracts to arts organizations to save money for the coronavirus response.

The plan sets aside \$2.6 million for private and nonprofit arts-related businesses.

That’s not enough, Sanchez said. “Arts organizations are particularly vulnerable because of the very high startup costs involved in cultural programming. ... The city of San Antonio depends on the tourist industry and the tourist industry depends on the strength and excellence of our cultural arts organizations.”

Nirenberg, who recognized the importance of preserving the city’s cultural assets, said the plan strikes a balance between addressing the critical needs of today and putting a “down payment” on the city’s recovery years into the future.

“This is going to be an ongoing conversation for us to change the economic and social trajectory of this city,” he said.

The City’s COVID-19 Recovery and Resiliency Plan is funded with \$79.2 million from the \$270 million federal coronavirus relief fund allocated to the City.

Federal money will be used to cover \$114.6 million in payroll expenses as much of the City’s workforce has shifted its focus on combating the virus, \$54.5 million for testing and contact tracing, and nearly \$21 million in protective equipment and sanitation supplies.

The City will use more than \$94 million from its general fund budget, previously budgeted for health and public safety payroll, to cover most of the workforce development and all of the digital inclusion elements of the plan.

Between the City’s general fund, federal coronavirus relief funding, and other anticipated grants, the plan during its first stage will total an estimated \$435.6 million. As more funds become available, the plan will serve as a “living document” to guide how it spends federal support in the future, Walsh has said.