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San Antonio mayor calling in heavy hitters for campaign to win voter approval of coronavirus economic recovery tax plan

Joshua Fechter, Aug. 21, 2020

Less than two months before early voting begins, Mayor Ron Nirenberg has called in several heavy hitters to steer his campaign to use a sales tax to help residents get back to work after they lost their jobs to the coronavirus.

The campaign, known as “Build SA,” faces the daunting task of figuring out how to break through a noisy November election to convince San Antonio voters to put more than \$150 million toward a still loosely defined proposal that city officials estimate would help 40,000 residents get higher-paying jobs.



They have little time to make the case.

“That’s the message: jobs, training, higher wages,” campaign manager Jorge Urby said. “And we’re not raising your taxes.”

Nirenberg tapped Urby, who recently advised presidential hopefuls Julián Castro and Beto O’Rourke, to manage the campaign.

The mayor has assembled a trio of co-chairs to lead the effort: Blakely Fernandez, a partner at law firm Bracewell and former Alamo Colleges trustee; Linda Chavez-Thompson, former executive vice president of the national AFL-CIO and a former VIA Metropolitan Transit board member; and Sonia Rodriguez, a leader of the local grassroots organization COPS/Metro.

Nirenberg also named Rebecca Cedillo, former CEO of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, as campaign treasurer.

Gilberto Ocañas, a former deputy executive director of the Democratic National Committee and a longtime Democratic operative, will serve as the campaign’s chairman.

Ocañas is now working as Nirenberg’s chief political consultant after the mayor parted with longtime campaign manager Kelton Morgan this year.

Most recently, Ocañas ran the nonprofit American Workers for Progress, a dark money group that bought hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of ads to help U.S. Rep. Henry Cuellar, D-Laredo, fend off a primary challenge in March.



According to a source familiar with the planning, Ocañas also has been tasked with putting together a separate “overarching superstructure” to coordinate a “vote yes” campaign for all three sales tax initiatives slated to appear on the November ballot: Nirenberg’s economic recovery push, VIA’s pursuit of dollars to fund expanded public transit four years in the future, and the renewal of Pre-K 4 SA, the city’s early childhood program.

But the initiatives will each have their own campaigns.

Former Mayor Henry Cisneros is also recruiting community leaders for that “superstructure.” A number have already signed on, but Cisneros said he isn’t ready to announce them yet.

“I think there is a great sense of wanting to get on track,” Cisneros said.

The proposals will be fighting for attention and expensive commercial time on a November ballot already loaded with a contentious presidential race, numerous heavily watched congressional races, a battle royale over a U.S. Senate seat, and hotly contested local and state races.

For his economic recovery proposal, Nirenberg is asking San Antonio voters to approve a 1/8-cent sales tax to fund job training and college degrees for San Antonians who lost their jobs because of the coronavirus-required restrictions that caused countless businesses to close their doors, many of them permanently.

The revenue raised by the tax — expected to be about \$154 million over four years — also would help participants pay rent and other living expenses while they complete those education programs. The idea is to help people get credentials needed for higher-paying jobs in medicine, bioscience, information technology and construction.

The revenue from that tax currently funds two programs: one that buys land to protect the Edwards Aquifer and another that pays to create linear parks and creekways.

The tax is expected to expire in April, when it’s projected to have exhausted the \$100 million in spending authorized by voters. Voters will not get a chance to renew that measure, to the chagrin of environmental groups. The City Council plans to vote on a way to continue the aquifer program with city funds and hand the linear parks and creekways program to Bexar County.

After four years, the tax for economic recovery would go to VIA for new buses and expanded services, if voters approve the separate proposition on the November ballot.

That arrangement is the result of a deal brokered between Nirenberg and VIA officials over the summer.

The third proposition, which would renew a tax already earmarked for Pre-K 4 SA, is independent of the two.

Of the three sales tax propositions, the economic recovery push has the least runway to make the case to voters. So far, the campaign doesn't have a website, a social media presence or money.

Given that the pandemic has made it dangerous to hold large campaign events and to block walk, the campaign will likely have to invest more heavily in ads across the internet, TV, radio and other platforms, Urby said.

The closest physical contact the campaign may have with voters is dropping off flyers on people's doorsteps, he said.

"Look, it's really hard, let's be real," Urby said. "But the key is just finding the right message that penetrates the clutter and finding creative ways of getting your message out there."

The other two sales tax campaigns don't face the same challenges.

Though the Nirenberg-VIA deal is only weeks old, the push to use sales tax monies to expand public transit has been in the public eye for nearly a year.

VIA solidified its campaign team early this month. A political action committee backing the measure, Yes for Mobility PAC, has raised \$253,000 since it formed in April. As of June 30, it had about \$165,000 on hand.

The campaign to renew Pre-K 4 SA has its own advantages. The early childhood program has now been around for eight years. And the campaign infrastructure was already in place because the Pre-K measure was originally supposed to go on the May ballot but was postponed because of the pandemic.

The Pre-K campaign raised nearly \$278,000 in the first six months of this year but has about \$40,000 in its war chest, according to the most recent campaign finance filing.



The broad contours of Nirenberg's recovery proposal, in contrast, were only determined this month. Even though the City Council voted to put the measure on the November ballot last week, council members still had questions about the details of how the plan would work.

Should the measure pass, city staff would put together a plan on how to use the money.

"Getting the message out for a campaign that's not defined yet, you're clearly behind at this point," said Christian Archer, a veteran political strategist who worked on the Pre-K 4 SA campaign in 2012.

But backers of the workforce development proposal aren't worried about having little time to convince voters to approve something they see as more or less a no-brainer.

"At this point, I'm not too concerned because I think it's a sellable issue," said Richard Perez, San Antonio Chamber of Commerce CEO. "I mean, who doesn't want to have a better job and do it at a very low cost that they can turn into an opportunity to better themselves and their family? I think it just seems easy to sell."

This month, executives of four major San Antonio-area companies — Craig Boyan of H-E-B, Kevin Jones of Rackspace Technology, Wayne Peacock of USAA and Kevin Voelkel of Toyota Motor Manufacturing Texas — came out in support of the proposal and pledged to give priority to graduates of the proposed programs when filling job openings.

Nirenberg also has brought on James Aldrete, who worked on media teams for the Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton presidential campaigns, as a consultant.

Ryan Garcia, who advised Nirenberg during his 2019 runoff election and since has managed campaigns for County Commissioner Justin Rodriguez and Sheriff Javier Salazar, will be deputy campaign manager.

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