

San Antonio voters approve ballot measures for workforce development, transit & Pre-K

Joshua Fechter and Bruce Selcraig Nov. 3, 2020 Updated: Nov. 4, 2020 12:16 a.m.

A trio of sales tax measures to train San Antonio workers for new jobs, expand public transit and renew the city's early childhood education program were passing by an overwhelming margin with a majority of the vote counted Tuesday night.

Mayor Ron Nirenberg called the passage of all three propositions a "resounding vote of confidence in the future for San Antonio."



"I'm grateful to the San Antonio voting public that they support one another, especially during a time of crisis, that we come together as a team and we're united behind supporting our neighbors," Nirenberg said at a watch party after the polls closed. "This is an investment in our people. This is an investment in our future."

Mayor Ron Nirenberg celebrates with advisor Zach Lyke, left, as he hears very favorable results for the Ready to Work campaign at Augie's Barbed Wire Smoke House on Nov. 3, 2020. Photo: Tom Reel, Staff photographer

At 11:30 p.m., with 236 of 302 vote centers and all the early vote counted, Nirenberg's four-year, \$154 million plan to pay for college degrees and job training for 40,000 San Antonians who lost their jobs because of the pandemic was winning by a margin of nearly 3-to-1.

VIA Metropolitan Transit's sales tax push for greater bus service also was winning big, although by a slightly smaller margin.

"We're very appreciative of the confidence voters have placed in VIA and their understanding of how critical this investment is to the economic recovery and future of our community," VIA CEO Jeff Arndt said.

Pre-K 4 SA was on its way to renewal with nearly three-quarters of voters in favor of continuing the program for another eight years.

Backers of the three initiatives pitched them as integral to the city's recovery from the economic blow dealt by COVID-19, especially to the tourism and convention industries. More than 140,000 people lost their jobs since the pandemic came to San Antonio in early March.

"The mayor and the county judge showed great leadership in positioning these propositions so San Antonio could do something constructive for our future even as the pandemic continues. It was courageous and correct," said former mayor Henry Cisneros, who worked in the background in organizing support for the measures. "I further believe that VIA is in much better shape having a predictable source of revenue."

The city's high unemployment coupled with long lines at the San Antonio Food Bank haunted Nirenberg. Over the summer, he abandoned a previous push to boost funding to VIA in favor of the workforce development plan.

Nirenberg saw a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to equip tens of thousands of residents with the skills and knowledge needed to secure higher-paying jobs and put a dent in the city's endemic poverty.

Business leaders also long have complained the city's workforce lacks skills and education necessary to fill those higher-paying jobs.

But VIA officials chafed at Nirenberg's move. The transit agency's leaders and the mayor were eyeing the same source of money for their initiatives — a 1/8-cent sales tax that currently pays for aquifer protection and linear parks.

Transit authority officials believe mass transit in San Antonio has been significantly underfunded for decades and must be modernized to become a faster, more efficient system to serve a ridership of whom 50 percent live in poverty and also attract younger, more affluent riders who don't want to be tied to automobiles.

After the VIA board threatened to move forward without the mayor's backing, the two sides struck a deal to tap the tax for their respective purposes.

Nirenberg and the city will get the sales tax for four years for workforce development. Then beginning in January 2026, VIA will receive the sales tax indefinitely — or until voters decide to use the tax to pay for another purpose.

The workforce and VIA ballot measures had little organized opposition while the forces in favor had the backing of business leaders, heads of chambers of commerce and grassroots



Mayor Ron Nirenberg and Ready to Work campaign operations coordinator Isabella Brite watch election results at Augie's Barbed Wire Smoke House on Nov. 3, 2020. Photo: Tom Reel /Staff photographer

organization **COPS/Metro**. The two campaigns, plus the third to renew Pre-K 4 SA, spent more than \$1.7 million to convince voters to pass all three measures.

The workforce proposal was COPS/Metro's baby. The organization — which founded the workforce development program **Project Quest** more than 25 years ago — pushed City Council earlier this year to pump \$75 million into workforce development as part of a \$191 stimulus package and later put their weight behind the ballot measure.

On Wednesday night, COPS/Metro leaders felt vindicated — though they recognized the win likely wouldn't have happened without the suffering and heavy toll wrought by the pandemic.

“In every terrible, terrible situation, there are blessings,” Sister Jane Ann Slater, a COPS/Metro leader, said. “So maybe one of the blessings of COVID for the city of San Antonio is the awareness, the focused awareness that we need good-paying jobs. And we can't get those if we don't train people. People in businesses will go out of the city to get the workers they need.”

Gloria Acuña, 43, cast a vote for the workforce plan Tuesday at Collins Garden Library on the South Side knowing that she may need that training herself. Before the pandemic, Acuña worked part-time as a bartender and at a medical facility that opened in January. She's been out of work for months and notes she's not the only one.



Mayor Ron Nirenberg takes congratulations upon hearing favorable results at Augie's Barbed Wire Smoke House on Nov. 3, 2020. Photo: Tom Reel, Staff photographer

If the economy doesn't improve, Acuña hopes the workforce program will be there to help her out.

“We don't even know where we're going to be right now,” Acuña said. “We don't have a vaccine for COVID. So you never know where we might be next year around this time.”

Now, Nirenberg and city officials must hammer out the details of how exactly the program will work, how it will be overseen and other details — like the exact number of slots for those seeking degrees versus training certificates. The mayor and supporters have said the program will target job openings in industries including manufacturing, bio-science, health care, cybersecurity and construction.

“There's a lot of work that we are now going to commence with now that we have the voter approval,” Nirenberg said.

Critics of the workforce proposal — including former mayoral challenger Greg Brockhouse and Councilmen Roberto Treviño and Clayton Perry — had seized on a relative lack of details about what the city would do with the money if voters gave it to them, labeling the plan as “rushed” and “half-baked.”

Backers have said the plan likely would build on an existing \$75 million workforce plan the City Council approved during the summer as part of a \$191 million stimulus package — which was marred by technical issues when it was rolled out in September.

The city wouldn't begin collecting the sales tax for workforce development until September 2021.

Some progressives have criticized the workforce plan for insufficient public input and the lack of a jobs guarantee for those who complete training or degree programs.

They also have noted that even if the program helps as many people as Nirenberg and supporters say it will, tens of thousands of residents still will work in low-paying jobs in the retail, restaurant and tourism industries.

On the VIA side, Perry said his opposition primarily was about a “senseless” wait of five years, when the transit picture in San Antonio may have changed greatly.

Perry said VIA's loss of 10 million riders since 2012, with an increase of \$67 million in spending, left him “unhappy with the vision and direction” of the transit agency despite his previous support for the \$10 million in city funding.

Even with the passage of Tuesday's proposition, VIA's five-year outlook appears to be one of constant belt-tightening and delayed dreams for Arndt, who helped design the now-mothballed “VIA Reimagined” program, a robust plan to bring dozens of new buses and rail-like vehicles to a large network of dedicated lanes that urban planners call bus rapid transit.

VIA's newly revised budget figures now predict only a \$1 million deficit by 2026, but few economists are suggesting they know what a virus-crippled economy will produce even 12 months away, much less five years.

The City Council voted in September to continue the aquifer program using other city dollars over a decade, though at about half of its current spending.

Bexar County commissioners have said they want to take on construction of another 26.2 miles of trails, but haven't appropriated funding.