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‘Bloated bureaucracy’: San Antonio organizers blast city efforts to enact Nirenberg’s workforce plan

Joshua Fechter - Dec. 4, 2020

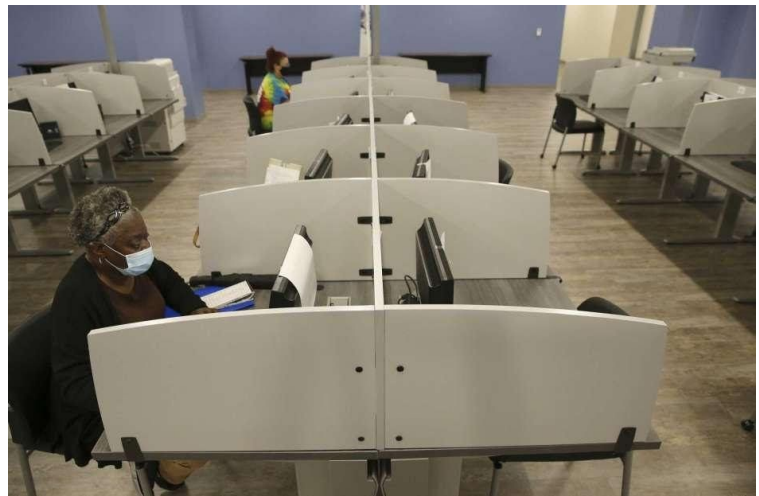
A key ally in Mayor Ron Nirenberg’s successful bid to win voter approval of his \$154 million job training program warned Thursday that plans to hire 63 new city employees to run it would be a huge waste of money and create a “bloated bureaucracy.”

Under a proposal laid out this week, the city essentially would create a new agency to run the program. Its employees would enroll participants in job training and college degree programs and help make sure they don’t drop out.

The city plans to mount a nationwide search for an executive director.

“That’s one heck of a bloated bureaucracy from the get-go,” said Sonia Rodriguez, a **COPS/Metro** leader who worked on Nirenberg’s Ready to Work campaign.

The city’s ideas drew fire from Rodriguez and others at COPS/Metro — a local grassroots advocacy group that actively promoted Nirenberg’s plan to use sales tax dollars over the next four years to prepare San Antonio workers for higher-paying jobs. The organization founded **Project Quest**, a workforce development program, more than 25 years ago.



Sandra Campbell (foreground) looks for job opportunities on a computer at Workforce Solutions Alamo. CEO Adrian Lopez and the organization acts as the lead for intake and as a clearinghouse for job applicants. Lopez was at the organization’s newest center where, due to the pandemic and safety protocols, are accepting appointments only for job applicants to search for potential work in the area. Photo: Kin Man Hui, SAEN-Staff photographer

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COPS/Metro officials knew the city would have to create some apparatus to run the program, they said during an Express-News editorial board meeting Thursday – but not one as large as what the city is putting forward.

San Antonio already has organizations with experience in providing workforce development and “wraparound services” such as academic remediation, child care services and job placement, COPS/Metro leaders said. Therefore, there’s no need to build a brand new organization or look outside of the city for expertise.

“We’re saying that the city has resources available without going out to hire someone from the outside,” said Sister Jane Ann Slater, another COPS/Metro leader.

Instead, COPS/Metro officials said, the city should work with Alamo Colleges, Project Quest and existing organizations to bolster workforce development efforts. They have the skills to bring in applicants, educate and train them but need help in getting the graduates into jobs.

The city could provide funding, for example, for additional counselors at Alamo Colleges to help with job placement.

“They know nothing about these services,” Rodriguez said. “They don’t have the infrastructure to carry it out.”

City officials were adamant that their proposed approach is the right fit.

Alex Lopez, head of the city’s economic development department, defended the idea as “a lean and efficient model to implement a program with an approximate \$40 million annual budget that will serve up to 10,000 residents per year.”

San Antonio may have plenty of organizations with “substantial experience providing workforce development support for our residents,” Lopez said. However, “the scale of the Ready to Work initiative is unprecedented,” she said.

Two-thirds of the 63 new employees would handle “wraparound services” such as academic remediation, child care services and job placement, primarily for the

neediest participants. The idea behind that approach is to make sure the city is targeting and taking care of those who are most in need of training, officials have said.

The city would contract with nonprofits to provide services for those whose needs aren't as acute — which would account for more than 80 percent of the program's wraparound services, Lopez said.

Lopez also noted that local workforce development leaders can apply for the director position.

Nirenberg demurred on COPS/Metro's concerns, chalking it up as part of the implementation process.

“This is the right time for residents and organizations to provide feedback on the administration of SA Ready to Work, and we value COPS/Metro's input as we work toward the program's summer 2021 implementation,” Nirenberg said. “I look forward to the ensuing conversations and the installation of a framework that is certain to help tens of thousands of San Antonio residents find well-paid, stable careers.”

COPS/Metro was a key player in pushing the workforce proposal. Earlier this year, the organization prompted the City Council to pump \$75 million into workforce development as part of a \$191 million stimulus package.

Later, the organization threw their weight behind the ballot measure — which called for using \$154 million in funds raised by a 1/8-cent sales tax to pay to enroll 40,000 San Antonio residents in training and degree programs for the purpose of putting them in higher-wage jobs. For example, COPS/Metro targeted “low propensity” voters — typically younger, newly registered or infrequent voters — in 25 voting precincts to turn out for the measure.

The organization's leaders say their efforts delivered more than 50,000 votes for the workforce measure. Ultimately, the sales tax plan passed by more than a 3-to-1 margin — or a margin of more than 270,000 votes.

“At the end of the day, we didn’t bust our buns bringing in over 50,000 voters who don’t usually vote on this kind of an issue to support it if we had thought in the slightest that they were going to use this money to build a bureaucracy, to build a system that doesn’t start with the participant in mind but starts with the governments in mind,” Rodriguez said. “That’s never what we had intended.”

Joshua Fechter is a staff writer covering San Antonio government and politics. To read more from Joshua, [become a subscriber. jfechter@express-news.net](mailto:jfechter@express-news.net) | Twitter: [@JFReports](https://twitter.com/JFReports)