

# Commentary: It's Time for San Antonio's New Deal

By John Raharjo and Virginia Mata April 22, 2020

If there was ever a time to confront the truth, it is now. As of Wednesday evening, 1,080 Bexar County residents were confirmed to have COVID-19, with thousands more projected. Over 55,000 Bexar County workers filed unemployment claims between March 15 and April 4. In one week, 5,300 people called the City of San Antonio for housing assistance. And in a single day, over 10,000 families lined up for food from the San Antonio Food Bank.



*South Presa Street is empty during the coronavirus pandemic. Credit: Bonnie Arbittier / Rivard Report*

Goldman Sachs is projecting that over 37 million Americans could file for unemployment benefits by the end of May. Some are predicting that unemployment rates will likely reach 30 percent. If these projections are even close to correct, many more Bexar County residents will be waiting in line at the food bank and calling the City for housing assistance.

When the Great Depression ravaged this country, President Franklin D. Roosevelt responded with the New Deal. He sought immediate relief and provided a legitimate process to reform the country. Considering what our community is facing and will face, it is time for San Antonio's own New Deal. The guiding principle for San Antonio's New Deal should be God's instruction to Moses: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18).

Bexar County and the City of San Antonio have responded well. We commend Judge Nelson Wolff and Mayor Ron Nirenberg for their strong leadership in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, but there is so much more that can and should be done to love our neighbors.

First, the City's Housing Assistance Program must be expanded and matched by the County. On Thursday, San Antonio's City Council will vote on creating the program. They are proposing \$15.8 million to assist families with housing, utilities, groceries, and internet access. That amount is insufficient.

Over 55,000 Bexar County residents have already applied for unemployment insurance. Another 65,000 taxpaying San Antonians are ineligible for unemployment insurance or any other CARES Act benefit. The City's proposal will help 10,000 families with \$1,500 per family; this will not be enough. COPS/Metro leaders are hearing a common theme, "I could pay April's rent, but I won't have the money for May."

The community must come together to create a \$70 million fund. The City of San Antonio should adopt Councilman Roberto Treviño's proposal to increase the proposed \$15.8 million to \$25.8 million. Additionally, Bexar County should match the City contribution with a \$25.8 million county fund. The balance should come from philanthropy and future federal stimulus packages. This fund would carry residents through a three-month period while their jobs return to normal or while they prepare for their new reality through training opportunities. Over the years, the City and County have been remarkably resourceful in identifying funds for special projects. Now is the time to come through for Bexar County's hardest-hit residents.

Second, while the federal CARES Act placed a moratorium on all late fees for public housing, Section 8, and federally backed mortgages, an estimated 50 percent of rental units are not covered by these provisions. San Antonio should follow Austin's example and pass an ordinance giving all tenants 60 days after the crisis is declared over to catch up on late rent before a landlord can proceed with an eviction. Additionally, the city should pass a moratorium on late fees during this crisis. Many members of the San Antonio Apartment Association have commendably already taken this action, but voluntary action from some is not enough. All tenants need these protections.

Third, the CARES act is sending Bexar County and the City of San Antonio massive sums of money, \$251 million to the city alone. These are public dollars and the priorities of these funds should be decided in a public manner and not in sessions closed to public input. The working groups that Wolff and Nirenberg created must be transparent and open to the public. Priorities should not be set behind closed doors, or in this case, closed videoconferences.

COVID-19 revealed the fault lines in our community, exacerbated the plight of our most vulnerable, and reveals how much we rely on poorly paid front-line workers. It lays bare the damage done by promoting the city as a "low-wage city" and deliberately red-lining minorities into poor and under-resourced communities. This crisis creates the opportunity to remake our community into a place where all thrive.

We must invest in all our county's residents, not just the wealthy few. We can invest in these workers by expanding programs like Project QUEST that has a 27-year track record of moving people out of poverty into high-skill, high-wage jobs. We must also ensure that Alamo Promise continues to provide tuition-free college for Bexar County high school graduates.

Creating opportunities today through thoughtful, well-funded education and training programs will ensure that all residents of Bexar County can secure a better future for themselves and their families. The future depends on an educated and skilled workforce. We have the talent; let's get them ready!

This is not a time for thinking small and coming up with excuses for why something is impossible. Now is the time to think big and "love your neighbor as yourself." Now is the time for San Antonio's New Deal.

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