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San Antonio voters give thumbs-up to workforce, pre-K, and transportation ballot measures

By Iris Dimmick-November 3, 2020

San Antonio voters approved all three citywide ballot propositions Tuesday night, choosing to use sales tax revenue to fund a job training and scholarship program, continue Pre-K 4 SA, and expand mass transit.

Nearly 77 percent voted yes for workforce development, the City's Proposition B; about 73 percent for Pre-K 4 SA, Proposition A on the ballot; and 68 percent for VIA Metropolitan Transit, the Advanced Transportation District's Proposition A. For full election results, click [here](#).

With such wide margins, it was unlikely that votes still to be counted from Election Day would swing the proposition elections.

Mayor Ron Nirenberg wasn't surprised at the overwhelming support for Prop B, which made its way onto the ballot in the wake of the economic shockwaves from the coronavirus pandemic.

"We had built a coalition, and clearly there is a recognition across San Antonio that we have to rally and support our neighbors in need to have a strong recovery from this pandemic," Nirenberg said. "The most important aspect of that is that we cannot return to the way things were where we had a city that had incredibly economic momentum, low unemployment, and businesses opening [yet] we had tens of thousands of our neighbors lining up at the food bank.



Mayor Ron Nirenberg (right) hugs his wife Erika Prosper after the announcement of early voting results showed the City's workforce development proposition winning approval from voters. Credit: Bonnie Arbittier / San Antonio Report

“The emphatic win for Prop B is a testament that our community supports one another and wants to invest in the people of San Antonio.”

The SA Ready to Work workforce development program will reallocate a separate one-eighth-cent from sales tax that is currently used for aquifer protection and greenway trail development to job training and scholarships. The four-year, \$154 million program is aimed at up to 40,000 workers who lost their jobs or are underemployed because of the coronavirus pandemic and at alleviating persistent generational poverty in San Antonio.

Sister Jane Ann Slater and Cathy McCoy, organizers with **COPS/Metro Alliance**, attended the small SA Ready to Work election night watch party at Augie’s Barbed Wire Smokehouse with Nirenberg. They saw the voters’ support as validation of the work done by Project Quest, a workforce development program founded by COPS/Metro that will serve as the model for the larger program.

To gain support for the ballot measure, the grassroots organization made a concerted effort to reach voters who may not have normally voted on local propositions – or at all, McCoy said.

“It was an educational process, I think,” Slater said. “We reached voters” by phone and in person.

When that tax expires in 2025, VIA Metropolitan Transit asked voters to approve shifting it again – in perpetuity – towards improving the public transportation system beginning in 2026. VIA receives less than three-quarters of a cent of the City’s 1 percent share of sales tax while most transportation agencies in large Texas metropolitan areas dedicate a full cent.

State Rep. Ray Lopez (D-San Antonio), who co-chaired the Vote Yes for Transit campaign, thanked San Antonians for their support of the ballot measure.

“From the very beginning of this campaign, we have said that this is an essential vote for an essential service, and San Antonians rose to the challenge,” Lopez said in a prepared statement. “As a result of the voters overwhelmingly endorsing increased funding for VIA, we will be able to maintain and improve service that aids in our community’s pandemic response, plays a vital role in our economic recovery and promotes our long-term prosperity as San Antonio continues to grow.”

The public transit agency is operating at about 85 percent capacity due to coronavirus, but the additional future funding means that it can more effectively vie for federal funding, said VIA President and CEO Jeff Arndt.

“The federal government won’t help you build something unless you can say you have the money to run it,” Arndt said. The one-eighth-cent sales tax provides that leverage.

He credited the extensive education campaign surrounding VIA's expansion plans as well as bus drivers themselves for making the case to voters. "Part of the reason we got the support we did is the quality of our front line employees," Arndt said.

Pre-K 4 SA was first approved by voters in 2012 and was seeking reauthorization for a one-eighth-cent sales tax for another eight years. Pre-K 4 SA serves 2,000 students each year and offers professional development opportunities to early childhood educators. But the reauthorization vote came after the state funding approved in 2019 allowing many public school districts to expand their pre-K programs to full-day offerings open to more students. However, that funding doesn't expand the number of children who qualify or can participate, and voters signaled they want the program to continue.

"To have such overwhelming support really shows that San Antonio is fully committed to high-quality early learning," said Sarah Baray, CEO of Pre-K 4 SA. "They understand that we've made the case that Pre-K 4 SA is an investment not just in our children and our family, but in our city and our future – and even in ourselves."

The results confirmed a Bexar Facts/KSAT/San Antonio Report poll in September that found that San Antonio voters said they would overwhelmingly support the three local ballot measures. Support for workforce development, however, hinged on poll respondents' understanding of the City's commitment to continue its aquifer protection program.

Nearly two-thirds of respondents said they would support renewing Pre-K 4 SA, nearly 60 percent supported VIA, and 64 percent supported the SA: Ready to Work workforce development programs. None of the measures would result in a tax increase.

However, in the poll, fewer respondents supported the workforce development proposal when informed that funding for aquifer protection would be replaced by money funded through the City of San Antonio's budget. Support for the workforce development measure dropped to 47 percent when the source of the aquifer funding was explained.

City Council approved its funding strategy for the Edwards Aquifer Protection Plan earlier this month, but two Council members voted against the plan, saying it doesn't ensure the level of sustained funding the sales tax does. Some environmentalists also opposed shifting funding away from the Edwards Aquifer Protection plan.

Since 2010, San Antonio voters have overwhelmingly opted to use sales tax revenue to pay landowners not to develop their properties over the recharge zone of the Edwards Aquifer and to build a greenway trail system. The trail system funding is not included in the City's budget plans so far, and Bexar County has yet to dedicate funding toward it.