

THE PROMISE OF RAPID TRANSIT

The plan: 7 corridors linking the city The potential: A community transformed

Express-News Editorial Board

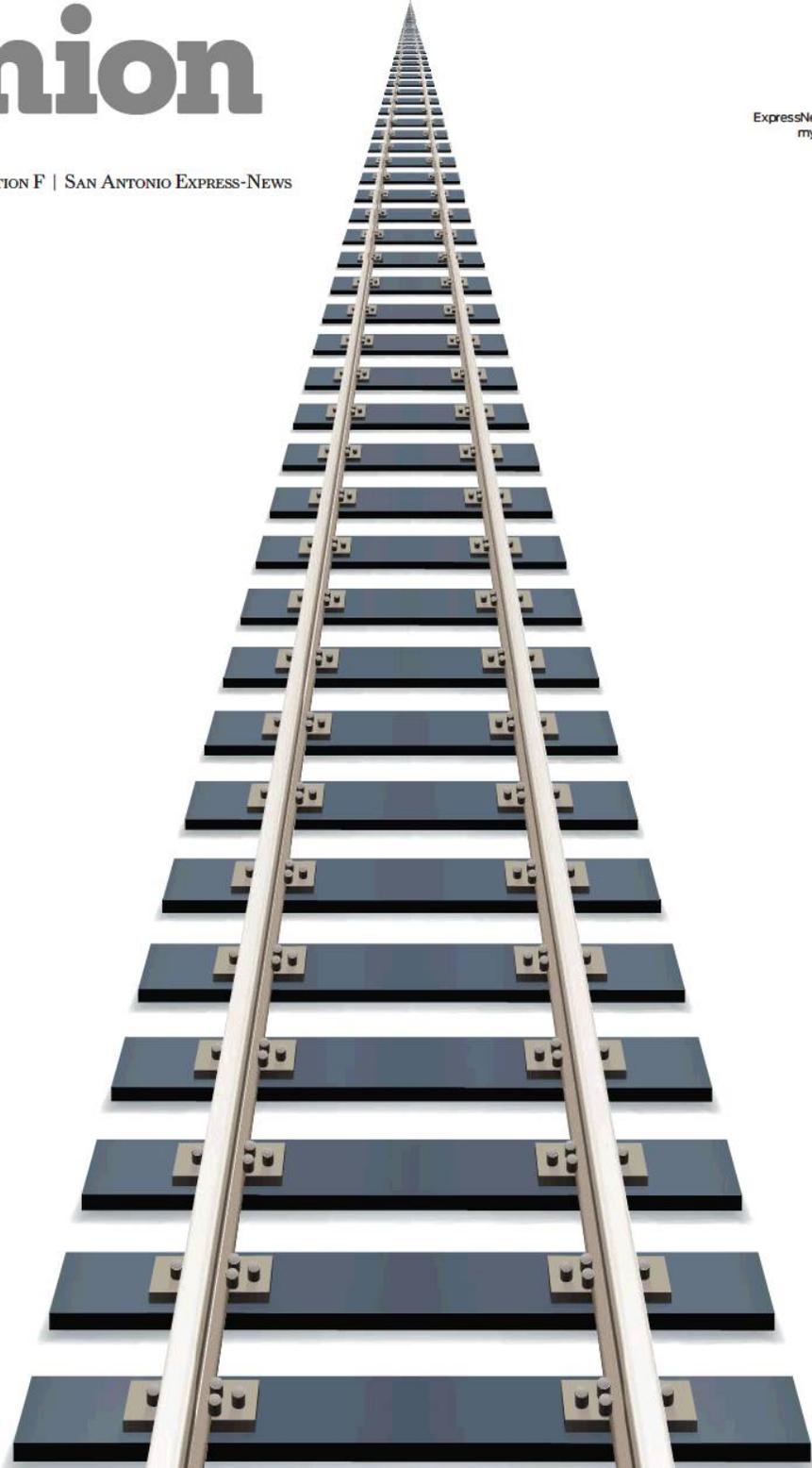
Opinion

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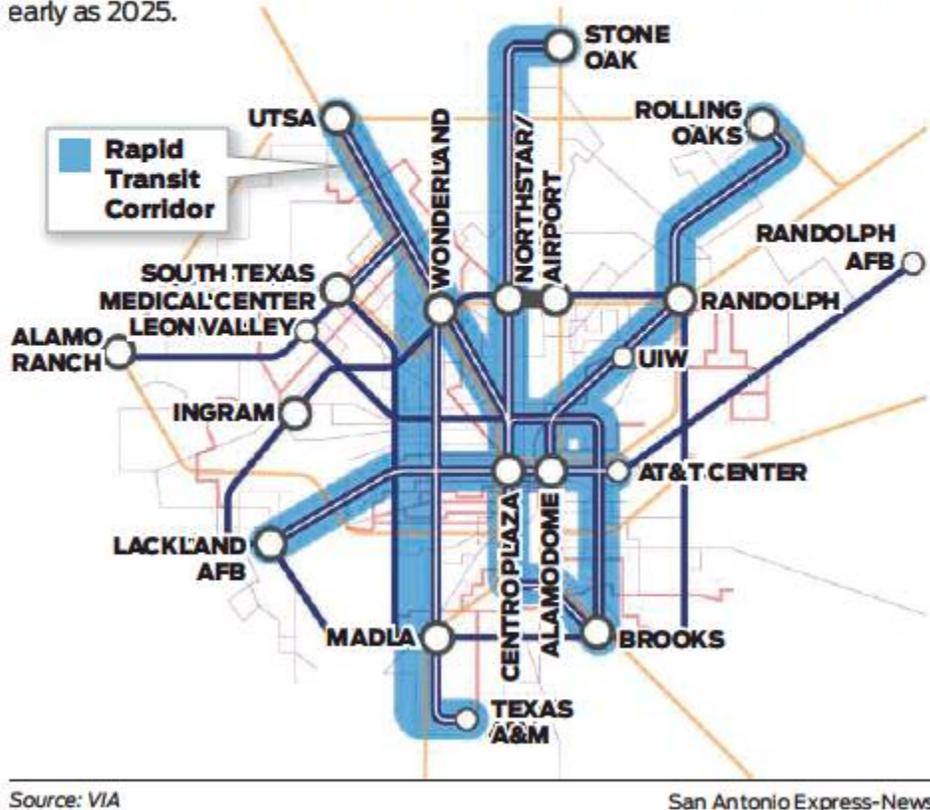




The strongest criticism of the failed and unpopular downtown streetcar project was that it did nothing to get people moving across San Antonio. It was narrowly focused on downtown when the city needed an expansive vision to serve the entire community. It was perceived as serving tourists, not residents. It was constrained by traffic, not free from it. And, of course, it was expensive. More than three years after the streetcar's painful demise, a comprehensive transit plan has emerged from its ashes. One that could fundamentally change how people get around this community, dramatically easing congestion and improving quality of life. Streetcar's demise killed light rail fortunes for the city? Fortunately, untrue. And we applaud this. The plan calls for seven rapid transit corridors. And these corridors could feature light rail or buses, which would operate in their own dedicated lanes. The specific routes and modes of transport have yet to be determined. But the general corridors are set (see the map on Page F6). One would begin in Stone Oak on the North Side and travel to the airport and downtown, for example. Another would follow Interstate 10 on the Northwest Side and link to Fredericksburg Road. Other routes would serve the South and West sides. Each of these seven corridors would link the community to crucial anchors: University of Texas at San Antonio, Texas A&M University-San Antonio, the Medical Center, San Antonio International Airport, Brooks City Base, Joint Base San Antonio-Lackland, JBSA-Randolph and the AT&T Center. The plan is the exact opposite of the streetcar. It is broad and comprehensive, and thanks to the use of dedicated lanes, it takes passengers out of traffic. That means what might be a 10-minute commute in 2018 would remain a 10-minute commute on a rapid bus or light rail line in 20 years, said Leroy Alloway, director for community and government relations for VIA Metropolitan Transit. This is all in VIA's 2040 plan, and it has been discussed at various public meetings. But it hasn't received much attention even though the first rapid transit corridor potentially could be operating as soon as 2025. The plan also dovetails with Mayor Ron Nirenberg's pledge to bring a transit plan to a vote during his tenure — likely in three years. "The vision for transit that I articulated during the campaign, and the work that VIA is doing to study and get public involvement on the corridors, they are parallel and complimentary," he said. This community has

VIA's proposed rapid transit corridors

VIA Metropolitan Transit is studying a network of seven rapid transit corridors to serve the region as it continues to grow. These corridors could either be bus rapid transit or light rail. Either way, they would require dedicated lanes to ensure mobility free of traffic congestion. Specific routes have not been set, yet. But this map gives the public a general sense of where the transit corridors would be located. These corridors are part of VIA's 2040 plan, and the first of these corridors could be up and running as early as 2025.



long been allergic to passenger rail of any type, and discussions about these corridors skirt around that sensitivity. Nirenberg, a believer in rail, said the plan so far is “mode agnostic, meaning it’s not presuming rail or bus rapid transit or some other mode.” The mayor would like to see VIA narrow the corridors down to specific routes — is a line running on Blanco Road or San Pedro Avenue? — and determine the mode of transport for each distinct corridor. “Within the next three years, we ask voters if they want to transform the transportation system in the city of San Antonio,” he said. The idea is to have voters approve or reject these routes, as well as initial funding for engineering and design work, which might be in the \$20 million range. From there, it’s a matter of building out one rapid transit corridor at a

time, probably through bond packages.

The view of the Editorial Board on this is quite simple: Whatever it takes to bring high-speed public transit to San Antonio. If the community prefers buses with dedicated lanes, as opposed to light rail, so be it. Just as long as the community embraces something that gets people out of their vehicles and moving efficiently across town, and as long as light rail is offered as an option. That can’t be done without dedicating a lane to public transit.

“We have to start putting in that infrastructure for tomorrow because, if we don’t, we will reach our threshold of pain,” Bexar County Commissioner Kevin Wolff said.

This is one of the most important long-term issues facing San Antonio. It’s one that touches on quality of life, economic development, economic segregation and sprawl.

By 2040, the region will have added roughly 1 million more residents. We cannot afford to sit idly by as more and more drivers pack our roads. We’re already paying a price, not just in increasing commute times or in the difficulties many VIA riders face in getting to work, but in economic development.

Whatever you thought of Amazon's calls for bids for a second headquarters and the choice by local officials to take a pass, San Antonio did not meet Amazon's transportation requirements.

Amazon wants ready access to rail, train, subway, bus routes and major highways. We lack rail. Our bus system is underfunded compared with other Texas cities. Our highways are often parking lots.

It's one thing to plan for or dream about transforming our transit system, but it's quite another to build one. Nirenberg has his work cut out when it comes to funding the construction and operation of these corridors.

Our political history on transit reflects that challenge. So does the lack of available federal and state funding.

But he also ran on this. And at the local level, we see possibility in what has been VIA's greatest weakness: its lack of funding. If funding can be increased, then these corridors can be realized.

VIA relies on far less sales tax revenues than its counterparts in other large Texas metro areas. The transit systems in Houston, Dallas and Austin all receive a full penny in sales tax, but VIA receives half a cent.

In 2015, that meant that even though VIA and METRO Houston covered service areas of more than 1,200 square miles, VIA received nearly \$400 million less in sales tax. This is according to VIA.

Allocating a full penny sales tax to VIA, or at least a greater portion of existing sales tax, would open a world of rapid transit possibilities.

It also means the mayor and other civic leaders would need to find other ways to fund community priorities, such as Edwards Aquifer Protection or greenway development. We await that part of the plan.

Wolff said discussions about shifting funding for other priorities — not necessarily eliminating funding — have been ongoing.

These rapid transit corridors have the potential to dramatically change our public transportation system and, in turn, improve the commutes and quality of life for countless San Antonio residents. They deserve the political will and public buy-in necessary to turn that potential into reality.

The alternative, stuck in traffic, commuting an hour each way, is unacceptable.