

Shift aquifer funding to COVID-19 assistance

JOSH BRODESKY
Commentary



As painful as it would be for him, Mayor Ron Nirenberg should drop his admirable quest to improve public transit in San Antonio.

Instead of asking voters to shift the one-eighth cent sales tax from Edwards Aquifer protection and linear creeks to VIA Metropolitan Transit to dramatically improve the bus system, Nirenberg, who has been exceptional at this moment, should ask voters to dedicate those funds to directly assist those who have lost jobs or seen significantly reduced hours in this crisis. Think rent, mortgages, utilities and food. There may be certain limits about what can be done, but the point is direct assistance. Such assistance could last either five years or be triggered to shift to the bus system when the unemployment rate hits a certain threshold.

Before this crisis, these funds were projected to generate about \$40 million a year, and while that number will be slashed in a recession, any money going into the local economy for relief would help.

As the novel coronavirus spreads and a public health crisis blends with an economic crisis, many discussions around closures and social distancing have been framed in terms of weeks. Public schools initially "extended" Spring Break a week, and now they are closed until April 6, for example. But this crisis will last months, and its aftermath will be felt for years. British re-

searchers recently produced a report that estimated it could take 18 months until a COVID-19 vaccine could be developed (and made dire projections about fatalities in the U.S. and Great Britain).

That's 18 months of potential disruptions (though not necessarily a lockdown) to travel, school and work, which points to the urgent need for testing for everyone and long-term assistance.

We are in uncharted territory, but many people need assistance now, not after the November election. While some of that help will almost certainly come in the form of checks from the federal government (under negotiation as of this writing), many economists have said what's being discussed is inadequate. To that end, Nirenberg should ask City Manager Erik Walsh to craft a local financial assistance plan to begin ASAP.

Nirenberg should also appoint a philanthropy czar to shepherd the private assistance effort. We've seen incredible actions from USAA, H-E-B and others. But we need a champion from the business community who could guide continued discussions about corporate philanthropy. Someone who could launch private accounts for direct public assistance and establish clear guidelines about how funds could be distributed, who qualifies for assistance, and how "regular" households can donate. I would gladly donate to a fund that workers in the tourism and service industry could access to help cover expenses. I'm sure many others feel the same way.

Finally, with schools closed, city officials also should consider converting Pre-K 4 SA campuses into child care settings for all medical workers. When school resumes, this could be a template should there be a COVID-19 re-

surgence in the fall.

At the state level, Gov. Greg Abbott could call a special session and tap the state's rainy day fund to send checks to Texans, just as he could expand Medicaid. But as Mark P. Jones, a political scientist with Rice University, recently told me, such a move would likely split the Republican Party just before an election. Plus, oil and gas prices, the two sources for the rainy day fund, have cratered and lawmakers will need to plug holes in the next budget. But it's raining now.

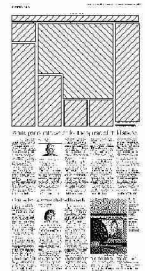
All of this makes the case for more local action – even if my ideas are inadequate or perhaps impossible for technical reasons.

Like you, I have waited in line at the grocery store and been overwhelmed by the headlines. I worry about loved ones. I'm obsessed about hospital beds and ventilators. I wonder how long my son's day care can pay teachers and other staff, even as its parent church has generously frozen tuition. I marvel at teachers sending online lessons to their students. I fret about the toll on San Antonio, the poorest big city in the country but the most generous community I have known.

Like many others, my wife and I have donated to Meals on Wheels and the San Antonio Food Bank. We recently paid our cleaning lady, but told her to stay home. We have done our best to play teacher to our kids during the day and carry on with our jobs at night.

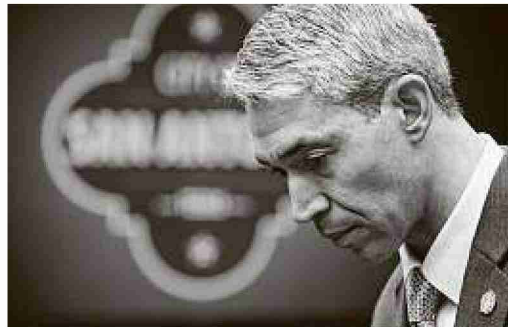
My best advice is to take one day at a time. Savor small moments of joy. Treat others with compassion and love. At a moment of darkness and isolation, take solace in how this crisis has revealed how beautifully interdependent we are, which is why we need more direct assistance.

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Jerry Lara / Staff photographer



Kin Man Hui / Staff photographer

Mayor Ron Nirenberg has been exemplary at this time of crisis. But with local restaurants and businesses empty, including on the River Walk, above, more local action will be needed.