

Virus upends city's plans on transit, aquifer

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Efforts to expand public transit in San Antonio and the fate of a plan to protect the city's cleanest source of drinking water have been waylaid by the spread of COVID-19.

For months before the crisis, Mayor Ron Nirenberg and Bexar County Judge Nelson Wolff pushed to redirect \$40 million from a one-eighth-cent sales tax that funds the Edwards Aquifer Protection Program and the construction of linear parks and creekways annually to pay for better bus service and other public transportation initiatives instead. They aimed to get that measure on the November ballot.

Simultaneously, city leaders pinpointed a way for the aquifer protection program to continue without those sales tax dollars after months of uncertainty about its fate. The City Council was set to vote on that proposal this month.

But COVID-19 has held up those plans and clouded the proposal's future.

Transit plan continues on A2

No decision has been made about when the election will be held. Hope Andrade, tri-chair of the ConnectSA transportation plan and VIA Metropolitan Transit board chair, said she's still optimistic the vote will take place in November.

"We must not lose momentum," Andrade said. "But we're very respectful of what's going on right now."

Henry Cisneros, another ConnectSA tri-chair and a former mayor, said Nirenberg has raised the possibility that the election could be postponed to May.

"He does not want to throw in the towel until we have a clearer sense toward the end of the summer as to where things are," Cisneros said.

Nirenberg himself won't say much.

"We are in the middle of a pandemic response," Nirenberg said.

"Anticipating the timing of a transit election is premature, and that's an understatement."

The coronavirus has already led city leaders to postpone one major election.

The City Council initially placed the renewal of a sales tax for Pre-K 4 SA, the city-funded early childhood education program, on the May ballot rather than the November ballot – believing that would boost the program's chances of getting an easy win. But as the outbreak worsened, council members opted to push it back to November.

Further complicating matters is the city's dire financial situation. San Antonio faces a \$180 million budget shortfall caused by economic fallout from the pandemic.

Sales tax revenue collected by the city is slated to take a gargantuan hit. City budget officials had projected that they would collect \$313 million in sales tax for the city's current \$1.29 billion spending plan. With the spread of COVID-19 hammering the economy and crushing retail spending, the city is projected to lose up to \$53 million in sales tax revenue.

"It's no question that the path for ConnectSA and its recommendations is more difficult because the sales tax is greatly impacted by this," Cisneros said. "It's down substantially."

Also on hold is a proposal for the city to continue the Edwards Aquifer Protection Program, albeit at about half its current funding.

For months, the question of how the program – popular with voters, who have renewed it four times since 2000 – would go on without sales tax dollars was hotly debated. Those dollars pay for conservation easements to prevent development in sensitive areas that feed into the aquifer.

Suzanne Scott, San Antonio River Authority general manager, proposed increasing that agency's property tax rate to help protect the Edwards Aquifer. But SARA's board rejected the move in Novem-



ber.

Nirenberg sought a new home for the program at the city-owned San Antonio Water System. The utility's CEO, Robert Puente, was open to the idea – if the program was funded with considerably fewer dollars than it is now. And SAWS board members questioned how much more land they would have to pay to protect and when the program would end.

In February, about three weeks before San Antonio reported its first case of COVID-19 outside of cruise ship evacuees brought to Joint Base San Antonio-Lackland, city officials seemed to settle the question.

The city, officials proposed, could continue to operate the aquifer program with money the city already gets from SAWS to the tune of \$109 million over 10 years, about half the current funding. That money would pay for the program's operations and for conservation easements to prevent development over sensitive areas that feed into the aquifer.

The City Council was set to vote on the proposal this month. But that vote hasn't been scheduled.

"Right now, we have other urgent priorities," Nirenberg said.



Associated Press file photo

No decision has been made about when the city will hold an election on redirecting money for aquifer protection to transportation initiatives.



Kin Man Hui / Staff file photo

Mayor Ron Nirenberg has pushed to redirect sales tax money for aquifer protection to transportation initiatives.