



**Statement by VIA Board Chair Hope Andrade
on Behalf of the VIA Metropolitan Transit/Advanced Transportation District Board of Trustees**

July 2, 2020

I'd like to take a moment to directly address our riders and the people of San Antonio and Bexar County.

You are who we are working for and whose interests we are tasked to serve as volunteer Board members at VIA.

In recent weeks, there have been several conversations about the future of VIA service and what that means to you, your families, businesses and employers, and this community we live in and love.

VIA Board members, managers, staff and partners have met with local leaders for what we hoped would be discussions about how best to move forward together—to get essential workers to essential jobs, connect seniors to critical services, and preserve the lifeline for those who rely on VIA as their primary transportation.

VIA moves people. We help bridge the gaps in equity and opportunity that are being exploited by this crisis.

COVID-19 shined a light on the true extent of San Antonio's reliance on the transit system and made clear that any strategy to address inequity in our community must include VIA and our riders.

The average VIA rider is a person of color, who takes the bus to work, does not have a car and has an income below the poverty line. They are the ones local recovery plans are designed to assist. They are the ones who will lose if these plans fail to invest in mobility.

We came to the table in good faith, asking for a seat, asking for a role, asking for options, and laying out our plans to support comprehensive recovery and future growth in San Antonio. Instead, we were told that now is not the time.

Then and now, we respectfully disagree.

Transit is important to our city and it is important to us. It is our responsibility to make sure it remains a priority for our city and region.

There is no question. We understand that these are difficult times. We see and feel the effects of COVID-19 on our economy, our resources, and our families.

That's why we are committed to continuing talks to find a path that supports the city's recovery plan and our community's transit priorities with viable funding for long-term service to the people of San Antonio.

This is not about filling a budget hole created by COVID-19. It is about closing the opportunity gaps created by 40 years of chronic underfunding.

We had hoped we could move forward together. Every strategy being discussed to address longtime inequalities and future challenges depend on mobility.



People will need transit to hold jobs. They will need transit to complete training and education that helps overcome income inequality. They will need transit to go to medical appointments and support local businesses. In every application of the equity lens, people will need transit to succeed.

We know because we've met them. They are the 35% of students who attend the Young Women's Leadership Academy and take VIA to get to school, including the class salutatorian who will be attending MIT in the fall and credits VIA for making her journey possible. And all the riders who take VIA to work, including our health care workers.

For them, and everyone we serve, we must find a way to secure viable funding.

When VIA was created, the state legislature gave us one tool designed to allow our community to choose when to make additional investments in their transit system—a cent of sales tax, of which we have only been able to leverage a portion for over 40 years. This penny is our only mechanism to fund operations.

In 1977, city leaders decided that VIA only needed half and maybe 43 years ago that was true. It is not true anymore.

What is a true statement is that we must reverse our 40-year underinvestment in transportation.

And while we wish there were another time to have this conversation, we are forced to take steps now to ensure lasting change.

The Board is required to take this administrative first step for a July 6 deadline to give notice of our intent to order a referendum be placed on the ballot in November of 2020. We now have until August 17 to call for the election.

When we met last week, trustees agreed to delay action on this motion to give us time to continue working and find an alternative funding source and ask officials to keep their commitment to support VIA and save this system from historic neglect. Time is up.

We were not able to secure a workable or responsible plan from city leaders, so we must go directly to the people. Too many livelihoods depend on a transit system with adequate routes and frequency of availability.

The VIA Board would be negligent in its duty to sustain the system if we stood by and watched funding which was originally made available for transit diverted to other uses and did not appeal to the voters.

If we do not act now, we may not have the opportunity again. Not in May, not in a generation.

We remain open to exploring solutions on how to get there. We believe those discussions should take place in public, with input from the community.

Even now, discussions are underway behind closed doors to divert funds intended for transportation for other yet-to-be-designed purposes. By asking for the election, we ask that these discussions with other interest groups



be brought into the open so that the public can transparently weigh in on the priorities and help decide the role of transit in an equity plan.

We cannot support a plan that takes a step backward for a service as essential as mobility and an issue as critical as equity for San Antonians. We cannot support a plan that pulls funding away from transit at the expense of our riders.

We are encouraged to hear City Councilmembers support the possibility of including funds for VIA in the city budget next fiscal year. However, dollars from the city's general fund are subject to annual approval and though helpful, fall short of the commitment riders need to assure they'll have the service they need in the future.

If we delay again, we could lose the one option provided by state law.

If we fail to adequately fund transit, we will have failed working San Antonians who are helping rebuild our economy, and will further limit options for people with disabilities and seniors who rely on transit as their only means of mobility.

San Antonio cannot effectively start an equity strategy by taking a step backward on public transit. The very same people who have been locked out of our wage, education, and health advantages will be left without the physical access they need, and which public transit provides.

The cost of inaction is just too high. We will not ask you to continue to pay the price. The choice should belong to the voters.

The VIA Board and our leadership is focused on making transit part of a brighter future in San Antonio, with support from our community. We are grateful to our partners and all those who have taken the time to listen, to understand and to speak up on this important issue.

Thank you, Board members for your bold action. And thank you, San Antonio. You are our motivation to continue the work that will pave this path.

We trust in your wisdom to help us do what is necessary and right to preserve this lifeline that connects our community.