



Mayor's plan to move tax money from Edwards Aquifer protection to transit draws criticism

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SAN ANTONIO - Mayor Ron Nirenberg's push to expand public transportation is already attracting opposition due to the either/or nature of the plan.

San Antonians may be forced to choose between Edwards Aquifer water protection or enhancing the bus system..

Currently, a 1/8th cent sales tax funnels about \$90 million every five years to a highly regarded and extremely successful aquifer program. But Nirenberg wants to redirect that money to VIA.

"We can't build an environmentally sustainable city with three million people in it, which is the projection in 2050, unless we have an adequate public transportation system," he says. "We cannot move forward in the city, unless we end the historic under-investment in public transportation."

Nirenberg insists he is the aquifer's leading advocate and will work tirelessly to find alternative funding to protect the city's water needs. But the sales tax is the only legal option to fund transit, he says, noting there are alternative sources to secure aquifer protection funding.

He doesn't want to wait until that alternative funding is secured though, before moving the money from the aquifer - along with a large chunk from the creekway system - to transit.

"There is some risk involved. But the greatest risk of all is for us not even to try," Nirenberg says.

Randal O'Toole of the Cato Institute, a public policy research organization, disagrees.

"Transit is slow. It's inconvenient. People don't want to stand out in the heat of the summer or the cold of winter to wait for a bus," he says. "I think we need to talk about running transit with less money."

O'Toole studies national transit numbers for metro areas and has some strong opinions about San Antonio. He also has numbers to support his conclusions, particularly when the choice is between buses and the aquifer, which supplies 70 percent of San Antonio's water needs.

"Only about two percent of commuters use transit to get to work," O'Toole says. "I wonder why they think the needs of the two percent outweigh the needs of the 70 percent. It doesn't make sense to me."

He also questioned the need to spend more money on a system that is losing customers.

"Transit ridership is rapidly declining despite throwing money at it," he says. "VIA has increased service by 17 percent since 2012 and they've lost 24 percent of their riders."

Nirenberg though says residents are out-spoken about their desire for an expanded transit system.

"They are tired of congestion. They are tired of a public transportation system that has had pretty dramatic under-investment that has resulted in unreliable service in many areas of the city," he says.

Randal O'Toole of the Cato Institute, an expert on transit in metro areas, is critical of a plan to move funding from aquifer protection to transportation. (SBG photo)

O'Toole is based in Oregon but spends a lot of time focusing on Texas transportation systems.

"I'm particularly interested in urban areas in Texas because to me, Texas is for the most part a model of how the rest of the United States should be. Texas really believes in freedom and personal choice. The idea that we should spend a lot of money on something people aren't going to use is not very popular in Texas."

He also points out the bus system is not environmentally friendly - he calls buses brown and cars green - and is also downtown-centric.

"If you're a downtown property owner, you see some benefits in having all the buses run through downtown and bring people to work in your area," he says. "But the fact is not that many jobs in San Antonio are downtown anymore. They're spread out all over the place."

"If you really believe we need to save energy and reduce greenhouse gas emissions, then you should try to get people into more fuel-efficient cars."

O'Toole has a radical solution for the city's transit issues, where fares cover less than 10 percent of VIA's costs.

"Only about 14,000 low income people rely on transit to get to work, so rather than spend \$240 million a year on transit for everybody, why not just give those 14,000 people vouchers?" he says.

Aquifer advocates also question the loss of the primary source of their protection funding.

"It doesn't make sense to us to come after funding for a highly successful program," says Annalisa Peace, executive director of the Greater Edwards Aquifer Alliance. "We just don't think that alternative sources of funding would work to maintain the program as it exists now."

Annalisa Peace, executive director of the Greater Edwards Aquifer Alliance, questions why the mayor wants to take \$90 million from the aquifer protection effort. (SBG photo)

San Antonians support the program she calls "an international model of what to do to protect your water," and notes "the program is working really well. It's a very common sense approach, but we still have work to do if we're going to protect our water supply."

In addition to the \$90 million in revenue that would be taken from aquifer protection, another \$80 million pegged for the linear creekway system would also be redirected to transit, Peace says.

"The tax they want to take is not going to be enough to fund the transportation system," Peace says. "They're going to be looking for alternative sources to fund that anyway.

"I don't like to see it as an either/or situation," she added. "Our city is unusual in that people really value and know we have one of the cleanest water supplies in the world."

Nirenberg says he plans to ask Council to approve a ballot measure that would ask voters in November of 2020 to authorize the change.