



June 11, 2020

<Organization>
<Attn: Addressee>
<Address>
<City, State Zip>
<Email>

RE: SA Resiliency Plans must include equitable transportation for Older Adults and People w/ Disabilities

Dear <Salutation>;

It has come to our attention that due to budget shortfalls, VIA may have to cut or reduce services for up to 150,000 riders, including thousands of older adult riders and riders with disabilities. This is simply unacceptable.

We are writing as concerned citizens and service providers who work with the older adult and disability populations in San Antonio. We are partners in the Successful Aging and Living in San Antonio (SALSA) initiative, which was created by the San Antonio Area Foundation to increase leadership, collaboration, and funding to ensure older adults have access to necessary services, information, and support systems. SALSA is comprised of a multi-stakeholder, multi-sector steering committee, and four focused workgroups. The workgroups are transportation, housing, and socialization, and caregiver support.

As you know, the one-cent tax, which other municipalities have fully allocated to their transportation systems, is already divided up between several resources for San Antonio, diluting the ability of our public transportation system to meet the current needs of our local community...especially when considering the needs of our older adults and those living with a disability. We have witnessed the long-term hold alternate designations have on this one-cent tax, *draining our public transportation system of greatly needed funding*. For the older adult and disability populations, public transportation is often the only choice they have to access healthcare, employment, food, and avoid isolation and seclusion.

The Resiliency Plan for San Antonio focuses on important areas including workforce development, small business support, the digital divide, and housing security. However, it leaves one fundamental consideration off the table...transportation. While limited resources may be going to organizations or entities that will be providing essential services such as healthcare, workforce development, and food distribution; these services *become useless to the people who will no longer be able to access them due to reduced transit services*. This is not an equitable solution to sustaining our community.

If VIA does not receive new, sustainable funding, whether from the 1/8-cent tax or somewhere else, 35 of the 90 bus routes are now slated to be cut effective January 1st, 2021.

With the reduction in routes, there is always a significantly greater negative impact on older adults and individuals living with disabilities who rely on the transit and para-transit services VIA provides.



VIA was already underfunded prior to COVID-19. With a reduction in sales tax collection and bus fares, as a result of the “Stay Home, Stay Safe” order, this decision may just be the final blow to an already stressed system that people depend on.

In addition to the reduction in financial resources, VIA’s compliance with social distancing recommendations requires increased services just to maintain the current ridership, thereby increasing its costs significantly. While we are trying to forge forward as a community, even a 15% reduction in services will directly impact the lives of over 100,000 San Antonio residents. The reduction will also cause a ripple effect in the reduction of jobs for drivers, the quality of the maintenance and upkeep of our buses, etc.

Let’s be reminded of the conversations back in November 2019 that led our community to look at the reallocation of the 1/8 cent tax. These statements and conversations are still as valid today as they were in November, and in effect, the need is even greater now.

“San Antonio mayor: transit future hinges on sales tax shift,” *Express-News*, Nov. 13

“San Antonio must make up for 1977 mistake by properly funding public transit,” *Express-News*, Nov. 27

The unilateral decision to remove the 1/8-cent from the ballot for VIA will not impact the older adult and disability communities in San Antonio exclusively, but as more families struggle financially in the COVID-19 recovery period, more people will be turning to public transportation. Yet they will be faced with even more of a shortage in transit services. While other communities across Texas have seen up to a 90% decrease in their ridership during the COVID-19 pandemic, San Antonio has only experienced a 50% drop by comparison. This says something. It says that our community NEEDS public transportation. Not just our older adults and those living with a disability, but our essential workers who NEED to continue to get to work. There are even some routes servicing the same level of ridership as they did pre-COVID, but now require more buses to provide the same level of services to respect social distancing requirements.

“Texas transit agencies are still getting front-line responders and low-income Texans to work. But service may change as the crisis continues.” *The Texas Tribune*, March 18, 2020

It is disturbing that the leadership of VIA was not approached for feedback or input before this announcement was made. The reduced routes will specifically impact 1,364 individuals who currently use paratransit services and will no longer be eligible for services. This is a tragic and inequitable way to move forward into a COVID-19 Recovery phase. With the cuts to VIA services, we will begin to overburden on our already strained local nonprofit agencies that are tasked with filling the gap in transportation services where VIA will leave a void. Our nonprofits are already struggling to stay afloat.

It’s not clear to us why the 1/8 cent was good enough to fund a mass transit system for the future (VIA Reimagined) but not good enough to support the vulnerable communities who need transit in an emergency right now. We have come together to ask that the 1/8 cent sales-tax funding for transportation be placed back on the November ballot and let the citizens of San Antonio decide. A delay in this vote will reduce the equitable voice of the marginalized populations its impact directly



effects. Historically, marginalized populations turn out in higher numbers for the major elections (i.e. November) and in lower numbers for other elections (i.e. May).

Equitable access for older adults and individuals with disabilities living in our community is at stake. Stand with us in moving our beloved community forward...acting as a community that upholds the value and considerations of our older adults and those living with a disability to a higher standard.

Serving together,



REFERENCES

“San Antonio mayor: transit future hinges on sales tax shift” *Express News*, Nov. 13, 2019
<https://www.expressnews.com/news/local/article/Nirenberg-urges-shifting-of-sales-tax-from-14832340.php>

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<https://www.texastribune.org/2020/03/18/texas-public-transportation-open-amid-coronavirus-service-may-change/>

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https://www.expressnews.com/news/news_columnists/gilbert_garcia/article/San-Antonio-must-make-up-for-1977-mistake-by-14865367.php