

Mayor: 'This is not a rail plan'

Voters will decide 'future-proof' mass transit, he says

By Josh Baugh

STAFF WRITER

Mayor Ron Nirenberg and Bexar County Judge Nelson Wolff quashed any lingering rumors and speculation about an emerging multimodal transit plan: It will not include any form of rail, they said Tuesday.

An initial phase and a funding mechanism is expected to go before voters next year, possibly in May, coinciding with municipal elections.

"This is the opportunity for voters to say 'yes.' What we're saying is, don't misconstrue

what is happening here," Nirenberg said. "There are going to be people who suggest this is light rail. That is absolutely not true. This is not a rail plan. This is a future-proof transit plan for the city of San Antonio that is cost-effective, that is high-quality ... and is flexible."

It's not the first time the leaders have said as much, though perhaps not as emphatically as they did Tuesday in an effort to stamp out any speculation that a rail plan might be afoot.



William Luther / San Antonio Express-News

Mayor Ron Nirenberg (left) listens as Bexar County Judge Nelson Wolff ticks off ideas for diverse modes of transit.

Nirenberg was also clear that while there may not be a legal requirement to hold a public vote, the city would do so nonetheless.

"The mass-transit portion of this will go to a public vote, whether or not it's required. It's so critically important that the people of San Antonio finally get an opportunity to say yes to something other than the status quo," he said. "I think if you have conversations with neighborhoods, no matter where you are in San Antonio, people are sick and tired of the status quo, sick and tired of sitting in congestion that's only getting worse."

Nirenberg said San Antonio has staved off congestion issues by continued sprawl, but that likely won't continue as urban density is increasing.

And though they're removing rail from the mix, the officials say they believe the transit corridors will still promote development as rail has in other cities.

"You're providing a transit-only lane and whether it's riding on a rail or it's riding on rubber tires, if that's the thing that's going to be here and they know it's going to be here, then you'll have development around it," Wolff said.

The plan is expected to include dedicated rights of way for set, trackless routes that would be serviced by mass-transit vehicles that can scale up as demand increases, Nirenberg said.

"What's extraordinary about this situation is we have the chance to use future-proof technology — trackless transit that is scalable to ridership demands, that is cost-effective to cover the expansiveness of our geography, and also, again, is an opportunity to be an adopter of advanced technology," Nirenberg said.

Wolff said the overall plan would include diverse modes of transit that give residents choice about how they move around town, from buses on dedicated rights of way to ride-hailing. He also speculated that bicycles, scooters and even autonomous vehicles could play a role in reducing congestion here.

"We're trying to build a transit system that gives people a choice. You can ride the bus. They can take a trolley or a connecting link downtown," he said. "They can use ride-share, whether it's Uber or Lyft ... how do you connect that last mile. Is it bicycles, or autonomous vehicles again or scooters?"

That both Nirenberg and Wolff are shunning light rail in San Antonio is notable given their support, though both still are interested in the potential for a rail connection between San Antonio and Austin — a plan that has been in the works for decades but has seen little forward movement.

They both seemed excited about the prospects of high-tech transit here after a Tricentennial news conference Tuesday welcoming one of the city's first babies born on San Antonio's 300th birthday.

"We have the opportunity to be innovators rather than last in line for old technology. And so when we say it's not a light-rail plan, it's absolutely not a light-rail plan," Nirenberg said. "We are beyond light rail. The world is beyond light rail. We can do better, we can do more with fewer resources, and that's what we are going to bring to voters."

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