

New VIA trustees like ideas of mayor

Nirenberg pushes light rail

By Bruce Selcraig
STAFF WRITER

Four new board members seen as tech-savvy and aligned with Mayor Ron Nirenberg's plans for mass transit have been named to the VIA board of trustees, joining two other new members chosen earlier this year.

The new appointees — three by the city, two by the county and one by a coalition of county suburbs — will work with VIA CEO Jeffrey Arndt in managing a \$229 million budget that now goes almost entirely to running the city's bus system. Members serve staggered two-year terms.

They assume their posts following the unveiling earlier this month of a nonprofit group hatched by Nirenberg and Bexar County Judge Nelson Wolff called ConnectSA, which will help push a "multi-modal" transportation system — think light rail, autonomous cars, more HOV lanes — that would go before voters by the end of 2019.

Bexar County voters rejected light rail in a 2000 election, and a streetcar proposal died in 2014 without a public vote, perceived by many as a downtown-centric idea that would have served tourists more than residents.

The new city-appointed VIA members are Brian C. Dillard, Ezra A. Johnson and Amanda Merck; Jordana Decamps Mathews and Marina Alderete Gavito were named by the county, and Louis R. Cooper was chosen by the Greater Bexar County Council of Cities, the suburban group. The city also has reappointed incumbent trustees Bob Comeaux, a labor representative, and Patricia Rodriguez, the board's secretary.

VIA board chair Hope Andrade, a former Texas secretary of state, will be leaving that position to become one of the three incoming chairs of ConnectSA, joining Henry Cisneros and attorney Jane Macon.

"The VIA board is an exciting, highly competitive position that a lot of people wanted," said District 1 City Councilman Roberto Treviño. "The new members include voices that represent a larger slice of our community."

He said the new appointees were committed to the multi-modal plans Nirenberg and Wolff favor, primary among them, light rail.

"For us to make this happen — getting rail passed," Treviño said as he made his way home from the Battle of Flowers Parade on Friday, "we need as much help as possible communicating the need to the community. Having a vocal and energized VIA board is a good thing."

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VIA BOARD

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The new board members have backgrounds in law, high tech, community activism, health care and politics, among other fields.

Mathews is the CEO of the Mathews Consulting Group and former director for economic development for Bexar County. "She's a perfect fit for the VIA board," said County Commissioner Kevin Wolff. "In trying to woo companies here, she brings a wealth of knowledge about our need for better infrastructure and transportation."

Dillard, an associate at Delta Risk LLC, has been chair of the VIA Transit Community Council



Comeaux



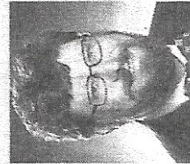
Cooper



Dillard



Johnson



Mathews



Gavitto



Merck



Rodriguez

cil since July 2017. A vocal supporter of former Mayor Ivy Taylor in 2015, he has previously worked on cybersecurity systems for Lockheed Martin and Shell Oil Co. in Houston, and he served on the board of the Dignowity Hill Neighborhood Association.

Johnson is a law partner at Uhl, Fitzsimons, Jewett & Burton, an adjunct professor at St. Mary's University School of Law and an instructor at the University of Texas Center for

Professional Education. "Ezra was very impressive," Treviño said. "He has studied our city's transportation needs and he frequently takes the bus." Johnson has also run for City Council.

Merck curates content for ¡Salud America! as a research area specialist at the Institute for Health Promotion Research at UT Health San Antonio. She also is a public health representative for the city of San Antonio's Active Living Council

for a Healthier San Antonio. "She lives on the South Side," Treviño said, "and we need that perspective on the board."

Gavito serves on numerous boards, including the Bexar County Child Welfare Board and the Airport System Development Committee, and is a business development director at USAA and former executive director at Tech Bloc, a tech-advocacy group. She also rides the bus.

Cooper, a former Alamo

Heights mayor and nearly lifelong resident of Alamo Heights, has a background in commercial real estate and formed a bilingual, international telemarketing firm, Calling Solutions, in 1981.

The VIA board usually meets on the fourth Tuesday of each month. Its next meeting will be at 5 p.m. May 22 in the VIA boardroom, 1021 San Pedro.

bselcraig@express-news.net