

VIA may approve route for streetcar

[By Josh Baugh](#) - Express-News
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VIA Metropolitan Transit's board today could approve the route for San Antonio's first modern streetcar line as the agency prepares to ask the federal government to pay for a substantial portion of it.

The agency is rushing to meet a Feb. 8 deadline for applications to a Federal Transit Administration program announced last month that would help fund streetcar projects. VIA is seeking \$25 million for a north-south starter system that would be a bit more than two miles long and run along Broadway and South Alamo Street, roughly from Josephine Street to South St. Mary's Street.

For applications to be seriously considered, officials have said, they must include a proposed route and local funding commitments. VIA plans to include both in its submission.

"San Antonio has a very good chance in this process. We are going to work very closely with our congressional leadership to put the best case forward," board Chairman Henry Muñoz said. "All of that is assuming that the board agrees that it's a good idea to put forward this application."

Before the board votes today, it'll likely hear from Mayor Julián Castro and County Judge Nelson Wolff, both proponents of the project. They say the streetcar system could bring robust economic development and inner-city revitalization to the rail corridor.

"The investment in the streetcar system makes sense in the long term," Castro said.

Keith Parker, VIA's president, said it's too early to determine the exact cost but that based on initial estimates and costs of other systems, he said the north-south project could cost \$90 million, which includes 10 percent contingency funds for possible cost overruns.

On top of the potential \$25 million grant, Parker said, VIA would pledge \$20 million to the project. But it's clear that the city, county and private sector would need to help.

Wolff said, "We'd have to see if we can find some funding in both the city and county government." The two governments, he said, would need to contribute a total of about \$35 million.

The mayor said it's a lofty goal.

"The challenge in front of us will be finding those resources, and it's not a small challenge," Castro said. "We'll likely seek private support as well."

Officials will look to the private sector for the balance: roughly \$10 million.

Parker said there's a "menu of things" that could be done, including public-private partnerships, public improvement districts and opportunities such as naming rights and sponsorships that could help hit that \$10 million mark.

The VIA president sought to dispel concerns that the project is moving forward too quickly and without enough information.

Parker said he agrees that VIA isn't ready to build a system now.

"We haven't done enough homework to move forward," he said, pointing to other tasks that need to be done: conducting an economic impact study, finishing a streetcar feasibility study and completing VIA's long-range comprehensive plan. But by speeding up the process, Parker said, VIA is effectively moving its timeline up by only a couple months.

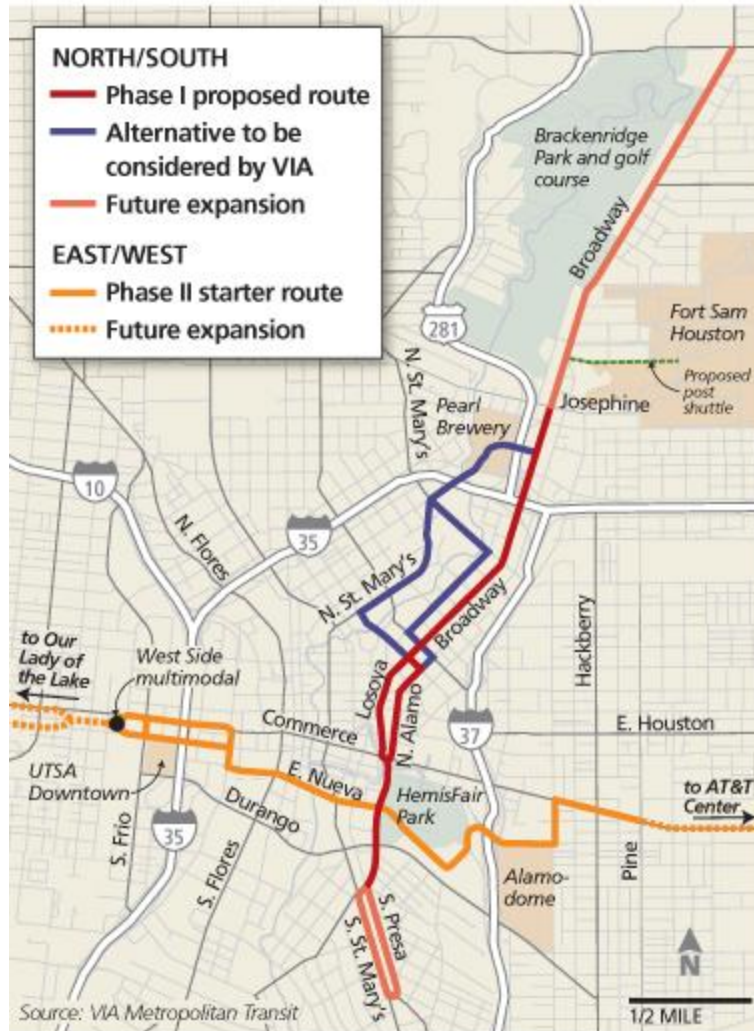
"The toughest piece of this application process is the deadline," Parker said. "This does not mean that we are going to build a streetcar. But this is a necessary step in applying for the federal funds."

VIA officials said the agency's east-west starter system, which would be built in a second phase, could be partially funded by another federal program in the future. That potential route ultimately could connect the AT&T Center to Our Lady of the Lake University, traversing downtown along East Nueva.

"I really think the idea of a system that is north, south, east and west is the right foundation for a new multimodal San Antonio," Muñoz said. "And we'll build on it, but we'll need help to build on it. This is just the beginning, and people should remember that."

Making connections

VIA is seeking a \$25 million federal grant to help fund a starter streetcar system. The first phase – a north-south route – could cost \$90 million and would run along Broadway and South Alamo Street. A second phase, with an east-west line, would run from a West Side multimodal center near UTSA Downtown to South Pine Street, east of the Alamodome. That line could eventually connect the AT&T Center to Our Lady of the Lake University.



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