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# Additional ramps eyed at 281/1604

## Mayor is seeking to avoid having the lanes be tolled

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**SUPERSTREET:** Redesigned road opens today. Metro, 1B

Mayor Julián Castro said Wednesday he will seek \$30 million in the 2012 bond program to help build connector ramps on the north side of the Loop 1604/U.S. 281 interchange, a measure that could help relieve congestion in the area and, at the same time, ensure the ramps are not tolled.

Castro said he wants to leverage bond money to help build the ramps, which would cost

about \$60 million, said Terry Brechtel, head of the Alamo Regional Mobility Authority, which is currently building ramps on the south side of the interchange.

The authority is using \$130 million in federal stimulus money for the southern connectors. The northern connectors would merge with much of the current

See 281/6A

## 281

CONTINUED FROM 1A

project, lowering the cost of the northbound ramps.

Castro revealed the proposal during a luncheon with the North San Antonio Chamber of Commerce.

Saying he hopes to turn San Antonio into a vibrant "brainpower" community with an improved quality of life, Castro focused on the need to strengthen the city's urban core and downtown. Cities such as Detroit, Cleveland and Chicago, at times, have experienced a "donut hole of decay," with a more robust outer ring.

"San Antonio has always been fortunate in that, that has not been the fate of our downtown. But it's getting tougher and tougher to compete against suburbs that are growing at a faster and faster rate," he said.

The mayor then announced his first major transportation initiative, which would focus on the far North Side. He said he believes the city has a role to play in "undoing the log jam" at U.S. 281 and Loop 1604.

"Traffic congestion in the 281 corridor is worse than probably any other place in the South Texas region," he said. "It is something that is the bane of many folks' existence, but more importantly, it takes away time that folks could be spending with their families or spending productively at the office."

City Council members and other local officials say they support the initiative, which comes just as the city considers whether to contribute \$55 million toward a \$180 million public transportation plan proposed by VIA Metropolitan Transit. The bulk of the money would go toward construction of a downtown streetcar line.

Castro said in an inter-

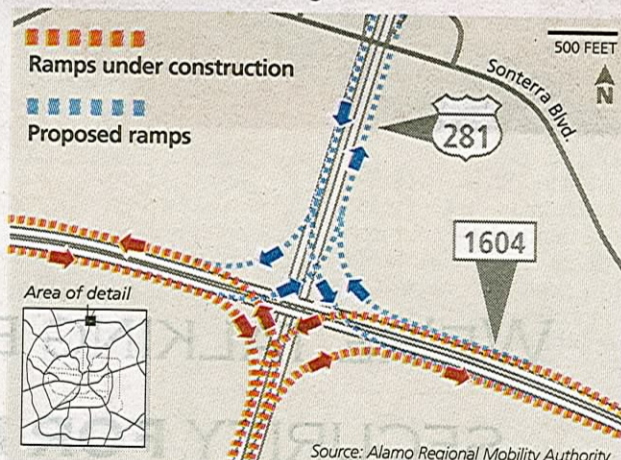


Mayor Julián Castro says he wants to leverage \$30 million in 2012 bond money to build the connector ramps on the north side of the Loop 1604/U.S. 281 interchange. The project would cost about \$60 million.

JERRY LARA/  
EXPRESS-NEWS

### Bond money for interchange ramps?

Mayor Julián Castro has proposed spending \$30 million of 2012 bond money to build the northern connectors to the Loop 1604/U.S. 281 interchange.



EXPRESS-NEWS GRAPHIC

view that the city is continuing to investigate the feasibility of rail in San Antonio, but he ruled out any rail initiatives in the 2012 bond program.

The mayor said the VIA plan and the connector project are two separate considerations.

"I've made a clear from the beginning that the city needs to do its homework before we embrace VIA's plan or not embrace it," Castro said.

VIA Board Chairman Henry Muñoz III said the agency awaits the city's analysis of the VIA plan,

but added he believes the mayor will continue to support inner-city connectivity.

"We applaud this announcement, and we think it's important moving forward that we quit thinking about highways vs. public transit," Muñoz said.

Brechtel also praised the mayor's proposal.

Because the southern connectors are nontoll, "it makes sense that the four northern direct connectors would also be nontoll," she said.

City officials have had preliminary discussions with the Texas Department

of Transportation, but they haven't solidified the plan. That would happen before voters go to the polls in May 2012 to cast ballots on a four-proposition, \$596 million bond program.

Clay Smith, director of transportation planning and development for TxDOT San Antonio, said if voters approve the bond package, the next step will be to find matching funds.

Work couldn't start until December 2013 or early 2014 because the 281 corridor is undergoing an environmental impact study.

The southern connectors also are embroiled in a lawsuit filed last year by Aquifer Guardians in Urban Areas, which claimed the interchange threatened the Edwards Aquifer recharge zone. Construction began in March; the next month, a federal judge denied AGUA's request for a preliminary injunction.

AGUA President Enrique Valdivia said he supports the mayor's proposal if using city bond dollars ensured the northern ramps were nontoll.

"I think that's a good thing, both for our allies that feel strongly about the tolling issue, but also from an environmental standpoint, that it would reduce the footprint of the project," he said.