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VIA seeks new way to fund streetcars

[By Josh Baugh](#) - Express-News

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Route added to starter system

VIA's board decided Tuesday to spike a federal grant application and seek a more lucrative federal funding source. The change in direction would allow the agency to build an east-west route simultaneously with the proposed north-south route, and it wouldn't cost more money to local partners – the city, county, private sector and VIA. Officials say both routes could be functioning by 2016.



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VIA Metropolitan Transit's board of trustees voted Tuesday to spike a federal grant application for up to \$25 million because it could have ended up costing the agency and its partners — the city and Bexar County — more money to build a streetcar system in the long run.

Instead, the board directed VIA staff to seek federal funding through the Federal Transit Administration's New Starts and Small Starts program, which allows for larger amounts of federal funding.

Using the Small Starts program, VIA would move away from its controversial decision to build only a north-south streetcar route along Broadway and South Alamo as its first-phase project.

With Small Starts funding, VIA would be able to build both north-south and east-west routes in its first phase of construction.

“The true upside of the Small Starts process is that we'd be able, with the same amount of local money, to do both projects,” said Keith Parker, VIA's president and CEO.

Board Chairman Henry Muñoz said this change in funding strategy could put to rest pointed questions about why the north-south route would come first.

Kevin O'Neill, VIA's chief lobbyist in Washington, told the VIA board Tuesday that the agency stood little chance of receiving the full \$25 million in its grant application, and the difference between that amount and what VIA were to receive would have to be covered locally.

Also, agencies that receive funds from that “urban circulator” grant would be unable to receive any more federal funding for the project, he said.

“The key thing we can't emphasize enough — if we succeed — we may get significantly less than the \$25 million,” he said. “The urban circulator program is a federal funding dead end.”

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