

To: Greater San Antonio Chamber
Re: Position Statement on Proposed Pilot for Free Fares on VIA
Date: February 2026

Greater San Antonio Chamber Position Statement on Proposed VIA Free Fare Pilot

The Greater San Antonio Chamber of Commerce supports a strong, reliable, and financially sustainable public transportation system that advances workforce mobility and regional economic competitiveness. We recognize Mayor Jones has proposed consideration of a 6-month pilot program to eliminate bus fares on VIA Metropolitan Transit's five most utilized routes. While the proposal is framed as an affordability and access measure, it carries potential fiscal, operational, and federal funding implications that warrant deliberate and transparent review. A policy change of this scale requires careful analysis of the full range of those impacts on funding stability, system performance, and our region's economic competitiveness.

Federal Funding & Long-Term Competitiveness

A significant concern is how fare elimination could affect VIA's positioning for federal transit funding. VIA's financial plan, including fare revenue assumptions, underpins its eligibility and competitiveness for federal transit funding. Fare revenue, while certainly not VIA's primary funding source, represents a stable and predictable component of VIA's operating budget. Eliminating fares could:

- Reduce locally generated revenue used for federal matching requirements
- Impact financial performance indicators (cost-recovery metrics) used in competitive grant applications
- Introduce uncertainty into long-range capital funding projects

The federal policy environment is increasingly competitive and performance-driven, with heightened scrutiny of long-term financial sustainability and local revenue commitment in transit grant evaluations. In this climate and given the scale of future federal infrastructure opportunities, San Antonio must maintain strong fiscal metrics and stable revenue assumption to protect our community's position relative to peer cities competing for limited federal capital funds.

Ridership & System Performance

Evidence suggests VIA's ridership challenges are driven more by service design (frequency, route efficiency, travel time, and connectivity) rather than by the cost of fares. If the primary objective is to increase workforce utilization, resources may be more effectively used to:

- Increase the frequency of buses on high-demand corridors

- Improve reliability and on-time performance
- Expand service to major employment centers
- Enhance safety and rider experience

A free fare pilot may increase occasional ridership without addressing structural barriers to regular commuter use. Reviewing the experience of other cities shows that fare-free transit is not universally transformative. If the five routes already represent the most utilized corridors, this pilot will provide useful data on fare sensitivity among most frequent riders but should not be seen as a substitute for continued investment in service quality improvements.

Operational & Safety Concerns

There are concerns within the business community that free fare routes could unintentionally shift transit usage patterns in ways that strain operations or alter rider experience. VIA Metropolitan Transit must remain a mobility-first system focused on connecting workers to jobs and supporting economic participation. Any policy that materially changes usage patterns should include clear safety, operational, and service-quality monitoring metrics.

Fiscal Sustainability

Fare revenue, while a small portion of total funding, contributes to operational stability. Eliminating fares without a dedicated funding source replacement would increase reliance on local sales tax and public subsidies. Any replacement funding strategy should prioritize long-term stability without increasing the cost burden on residents or employers. In a period of economic uncertainty and rising costs, additional consumer-facing taxes or fees warrant careful scrutiny to ensure they do not undermine affordability, business competitiveness, or public support for critical infrastructure investments.

Transit is economic infrastructure. Any structural change should strengthen, not weaken, San Antonio's long-term competitiveness and ensure VIA remains financially sustainable, federally competitive, and supports our community's workforce goals.

We stand ready to work collaboratively with VIA and City leadership to ensure any policy changes advance both access and long-term economic stability.