

Poll finds strong support for bond program

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February 2, 2017



A new poll suggests that San Antonio's 2017-22 bond program is on solid ground with local voters.

The poll of likely voters, conducted Jan. 20-23 by Pathfinder Opinion Research on behalf of the OneSA bond campaign, was obtained this week by the Express-News. OneSA used the poll to gauge support for the \$850 million bond program and test the popularity of potential advocates for the bond.

The poll found the strongest support for Proposition 1, which, at \$445 million, makes up more than half of the bond's total cost. Proposition 1 focuses on streets, bridges and sidewalks and has 89 percent popular support, according to the poll.

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Proposition 2, dealing with drainage and flood control, is nearly as popular, with 87 percent approval.

The only two bond propositions that appear to be vulnerable are Proposition 3 (parks and recreation), which has 61 percent support, and Proposition 4 (libraries, museums and cultural art facilities), which is backed by 59 percent.

In a way, this is par for the course with bond programs. Perceived infrastructure necessities — such as streets and drainage — tend to command overwhelming support, whereas voters get a little squishier about spending for projects — such as cultural arts — that they view as luxuries.

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In 2012, the last time San Antonio voters decided on a bond program, every proposition received at least 72 percent support, except for the two categories that are lagging behind this year. Parks and recreation won 64 percent approval in 2012, while libraries and cultural art facilities came in at 62 percent.

This year, there is the added controversy of a \$13 million allocation for a land bridge connecting the two sides of Hardberger Park. The land-bridge funding is split between Propositions 1 and 3.

The strongest criticism of the bond, voiced by former District 10 Councilman Carlton Soules, is that too much money is going to citywide projects and the rest of the funds are not split proportionally among the districts.

The Hardberger Park land bridge is one of the items Soules has targeted, but he has reserved his harshest barbs for the \$43 million Broadway improvement project between Houston Street and Hildebrand Avenue.

“Is that the most critical project, for \$43 million, that the city faces?” Soules asked, making it clear that he considers the answer to be no.

One of the most striking revelations in the OneSA poll is the relatively low popularity of former Mayor Julián Castro, who left office halfway through his third term in 2014 to run the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

The new poll finds that only 56 percent of local voters view Castro favorably, while 37 percent hold an unfavorable opinion of him. Castro was easily the least popular person/entity asked about in the poll. Mayor Ivy Taylor came off considerably better, with 68 percent approval and only 20 percent disapproval.

Questions about the land bridge haven't done much damage to the reputation of its namesake, former Mayor Phil Hardberger, who had 66 percent favorability in the poll. And San Antonio's police and fire unions showed no ill effects from their bruising collective-

bargaining battles with the city: the San Antonio Police Officers Association has 76 percent approval, and the San Antonio Professional Firefighters Association is viewed favorably by 73 percent.

Ella Austin debate heats up

District 2 Councilman Alan Warrick II has been trying to explain his position on the Ella Austin Center since last Friday, when this column looked at the East Side institution's uncertain future and its lack of funding in the bond.

Warrick told me Wednesday that the historic Ella Austin building is "unsustainable" and he believes it would be a poor use of city money to sink funds into a site with an estimated \$15 million in deferred maintenance costs.

Warrick said he'd like to see the city lease the Pine Street property to "someone that has a little bit more financial reserves" and move Ella Austin's services to other locations.

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That suggestion doesn't sit well with Brian Dillard, president of the Dignowity Hill Neighborhood Association. Dillard argued Wednesday on Texas Public Radio's "The Source" that the location of Ella Austin is crucial to low-income East Side residents, and he disputed Warrick's contention that no one in the community pushed for bond money for Ella Austin.

Dillard said Warrick never informed his constituents that a portion of New Braunfels Avenue funding might be available for Ella Austin.

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