

Statesman

Opinion

Opinion: Austin and San Antonio can set a 21st-century example — together

By Henry Cisneros

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The coronavirus pandemic is the correct priority of city and county leaders in our region at this time. Its consequences will be with us for years. Yet during that time, the Austin and San Antonio metros will continue to grow rapidly and toward each other. Recognizing the joint reality of post-COVID 19 recovery and of growth which will continue to lead the nation, it is time to enhance the collaboration which befits two of the fastest-growing cities in the U.S.

San Antonio is the nation's 7th-largest city. Austin is No. 11, but soon will rise into the Top 10, surpassing San Jose, California. Austin's metro population is approaching 2.2 million, and the San Antonio metro population is 2.4 million. In 30 years, the combined Austin-San Antonio metro areas will surpass 9 million people. The combined \$278 billion gross domestic product of the metros today is comparable to the current economy of Egypt.

Nowhere in the United States do two metros growing this rapidly – San Antonio is No. 2 and Austin is No. 3 in population growth over the last year, according to the U.S. Census Bureau – exist in such proximity. It is reasonable to ask whether two cities 75 miles apart, with different

histories and attributes, can manage the process of advancing together. Adjoining metropolitan areas around the world prove it can be done.

Dallas and Fort Worth, 30 miles apart, have built a world-class metroplex. Washington and Baltimore share airports and employment centers. Los Angeles and San Diego are about the same distance apart as Austin-San Antonio and are linked by high-value development along the connecting freeways. Milan and Turin in Italy, the multiple cities in Japan's Tokyo region and in Germany's Ruhr Valley have worked together to enhance manufacturing, technology and export clusters.

San Antonio and Austin can provide a 21st-century example through a collaborative agenda including these five topics:

- The region needs an effective transportation plan. San Antonio's VIA Metropolitan Transit and Austin's Capital Metro are working toward transportation-related elections in their respective cities. Inter-linked transit would maximize the benefits of our mega-region. The transit agencies initially can collaborate to extend bus rapid transit routes using high-occupancy-vehicle lanes and elevated lanes planned for IH-35.

- We are beyond the point where one regional airport could serve both Austin's and San Antonio's metros, but our two substantial airports can evolve by playing different roles in the national air-connections systems. The cities should discuss routes, airport investments and ground transit to serve the region.



– International marketing of the region’s technological, biosciences, educational and industrial capabilities would be more impressive than ever if executed jointly. The Austin-San Antonio Corridor in the past sponsored delegations to Japan from Austin and San Antonio.

– Both cities have ambitions to expand professional sports offerings. The San Antonio Spurs have won five NBA championships, and Austin is on the verge of Major League Soccer. Central Texas will be a solid candidate for Major League Baseball, an NFL franchise and a National Hockey League team. Professional teams serving both markets will be attractive to the sports leagues in the same way that the

NFL's New England Patriots draw from the entirety of New England and that the very name of baseball's Minnesota Twins links Minneapolis and St. Paul.

– A leadership forum is necessary. The Austin-San Antonio Corridor Council has served that important purpose for more than 30 years and merits support and strengthening. It encompasses the leadership of fast-growing Comal and Hays counties also.

We can avoid the worst consequences of lack of planning and of erratic growth in the Austin-San Antonio region. We can make wise investments, pursue inclusive growth, and assure environmental responsibility.

I am hopeful that over this new decade, as we came to terms with the aftermath of the pandemic, Austin-San Antonio leaders will recognize the rarest of opportunities to uplift the lives of the region's residents and of countless others who watch us around the world.

Cisneros is chairman of American Triple I, a national infrastructure investment firm. He is the former mayor of San Antonio.