

**State of Texas
County of Bexar
City of San Antonio**



**Meeting Minutes
City Council B Session**

Council Briefing Room
City Hall
100 Military Plaza
San Antonio, Texas 78205

2023 – 2025 Council Members

Mayor Ron Nirenberg
Dr. Sukh Kaur, Dist. 1 | Jalen McKee-Rodriguez, Dist. 2
Phyllis Viagran, Dist. 3 | Dr. Adriana Rocha Garcia, Dist. 4
Teri Castillo, Dist. 5 | Melissa Cabello Havrda, Dist. 6
Marina Alderete Gavito, Dist. 7 | Manny Pelaez, Dist. 8
John Courage, Dist. 9 | Marc Whyte, Dist. 10

Wednesday, February 12, 2025

2:00 PM

Council Briefing Room

The City Council convened a B Session meeting in the Council Briefing Room beginning at 2:08 p.m. City Clerk Debbie Racca-Sittre took the Roll Call noting a quorum with the following Council Members present:

PRESENT: 11 – Nirenberg, Kaur, McKee-Rodriguez, Viagran, Rocha Garcia, Castillo, Cabello Havrda, Alderete Gavito, Pelaez, Courage, Whyte

ABSENT: None

BRIEFING ONLY

1. Presentation on Arboretum San Antonio including organization profile and mission statement, site selection, master plan overview, tree nursery, and funding. [David W. McCary, Assistant City Manager; Homer Garcia III, Director, Parks and Recreation]

City Manager Erik Walsh introduced the Item and Former Mayor and U.S. Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Secretary Henry Cisneros, who was the founder of the Arboretum San

Antonio.

Cisneros invited Arboretum San Antonio Board Chair Evangelina Flores, who spoke in support of the Arboretum and thanked the Board for their hard work. Cisneros listed accomplishments of the last few years including the near-completion of the master plan created by Sasaki Consulting out of Boston, CEO transition from Tom Corser, who was a volunteer, to the new CEO Adriana Quinones, the purchase of an additional 18 acre property thanks to Leo Gomez, CEO of Brooks Development Authority, and raising funds to accomplish these goals.

Cisneros stated that the Arboretum was a place to honor and learn from our majestic heritage trees on the South Side of San Antonio. He thanked Councilmember Viagran for her support and leadership. Cisneros explained the difference between a park, a garden, and an arboretum. He stated that arboretums were living sanctuaries where the majesty of trees and shrubs was celebrated, offering a serene space for discovery, reflection, and connection with nature's enduring strength.

Quinones introduced herself and provided information on her background. She explained that the Arboretum's vision stated that trees branching generations, inspiring a deep love of nature, and Arboretum San Antonio welcomed all to connect with our cultural heritage and collectively build an environmentally restorative future. She indicated that the mission was for Arboretum San Antonio to provide immersive nature-based experiences that reflected South Texas' vibrant cultural and Indigenous legacies. Quinones added that the Arboretum offered welcoming places for retreat to support the well-being of individuals and the natural world, provide accessible programming that empowered and delighted individuals and communities, and research critical connections between trees and the changing climate.

Quinones explained that Arboretum San Antonio valued sustainable stewardship, cultural commitment, continuous learning, inclusive community, and engaged partnership. She mentioned that an arboretum supported health and wellness, environmental sustainability, economic development, research, preservation and protection of trees, access to nature, community, and education. Quinones provided a list of the board of directors and technical advisors.

Tom Corser, Former Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Ejecutivo, stated that the Arboretum was located on the old 200-acre Republic Texas Golf Course, which was the perfect spot with trees, water, and access to the highways, as well as a connection to the greenway trails. Corser noted that the property was in the flood plain and listed community engagement events that had occurred and 18,000 individuals were engaged to help design the arboretum and establish/support the values. Corser explained that the organization was developing a final concept.

Corser stated that while awaiting completion of a final master plan, a concept (April 2025) to initiate formal build-out, a tree nursery had been started with 140 tree seedlings planted in 2024 next to the pond. He noted that this was in partnership with Palo Alto College, who provided maintenance, and water distribution for delivery of recycled water to various cultivated locations was currently underway. He listed benefits of a tree nursery that would expand access to native trees in San Antonio, enhance biodiversity and urban resilience, provide a living classroom benefit for all San Antonio residents, provide opportunities to increase biodiversity in the San Antonio nursery trade, and provide dedicated space for production, research, and retail.

Corser reported that the master plan would be completed in April 2025 and would include an Operations and Maintenance Plan, a detailed cost estimate, revenue generating strategies, and a Phasing Plan. He anticipated a 2027 Bond Program request of \$25 million from the City of San Antonio and stated that the Bond Program would be one piece of a multi-pronged funding strategy. Additional funding sources included public funds, and corporate, foundation, and philanthropic donations, according to Corser.

DISCUSSION:

Mayor Nirenberg thanked the Arboretum San Antonio leadership for their efforts and supported the master planning effort. He supported investment in parks as well as Arboretum San Antonio with the next City Bond Program noting that he would no longer be in office. Mayor Nirenberg recommended connecting to the City Greenway Trail System. Corser showed a map of the trail Arboretum connection at two points to the trail system as well as to Brooks City Base noting that the Arboretum would not charge admission. Leo Gomez indicated that the plan was to be able to walk from Downtown, all the way to Brooks City Base and continue to the Salado Creek Greenway Trail. Cisneros saw the Arboretum as a way to help balance development and provide amenities for new South Side developments. Mayor Nirenberg hoped new developments would be required to connect to the Arboretum.

Councilmember Alderete Gavito asked Arboretum San Antonio for their total fundraising goal. Corser stated that the goal was to maintain operations including the staffing and property maintenance; the total cost of capital investment would be determined once the master plan was complete.

Councilmember Alderete Gavito asked about education on San Antonio's history and nature including bird watching. Cisneros noted that indigenous populations historically used the creeks for water and trees for food. Quinones predicted that the Arboretum would become a regional destination for nature watching. Evangelina Flores, Chairman of Arboretum San Antonio, added that the design firm had extensive experience in arboretums and took the board and community's ideas under advisement so the Arboretum could be a world class education and recreation destination. Councilmember Alderete Gavito recommended connecting with VIA Metropolitan Transit and ensuring accessibility. Cisneros noted that 18 acres was reserved for Bexar County to build a disabled children's accessible park.

Councilmember Rocha Garcia supported the maintenance agreement with Palo Alto College to provide training opportunities. She asked how the master plan would be developed for the properties surrounding the Arboretum and recommended that nearby developers ensure that existing residents were not left behind. Quinones noted that the neighbors were actively planning on ways to access and utilize the Arboretum. Councilmember Rocha Garcia was pleased that the arboretum would be free to the public and she wanted to ensure that residents would benefit and not get left behind in favor of visitors.

Councilmember Rocha Garcia expressed concern with safety and wanted to ensure that encampments would not take over the Arboretum. Quinones stated that any time there was a public open greenspace, homeless encampments would be attracted to the space, but she committed to working with the City of San Antonio to take care of the issue in a compassionate

way.

Councilmember Castillo thanked the staff and board for the extensive public engagement. She wanted to ensure that the goal would not shift from sustainability to economic development. Councilmember Castillo supported funding the Arboretum but noted that \$25 million was a huge request and she did not want it to take money away from other City parks. She recommended including the Parks Director in the decision-making if the City invested Bond Program funds and she also recommended input from the Sustainability Office suggesting more space for trees, particularly in urban heat island areas. Cisneros insisted that the Arboretum would be completely free, which would require public funding and support; the concept was to make something beautiful available to everyone. Quinones added that the Arboretum was in addition to City Parks and asserted that they were a complement, not competition.

Councilmember Viagran noted that the area was in a flood plain and having a master plan was important to ensure that the property was properly utilized and available to the community to meet their desires, rather than a free-for-all for dirt bikes and four-wheelers. She mentioned that she would entertain charging visitors, but not residents to visit the Arboretum. Councilmember Viagran commented that the 2nd Annual Sustainability Symposium featured First Lady Erica Prosper speaking about food as medicine and recommended more educational programs. Councilmember Viagran noted that the board worked very hard and was prepared to meet the challenges to give San Antonio a world-class arboretum.

Councilmember Whyte supported the educational and recreational opportunities including expanded use of the former clubhouse and driving range. Corser noted that the clubhouse and driving range was 18 acres under contract to be purchased and this was a strategic purchase for access to Northwest Military. Cisneros mentioned that the City of San Antonio owned a parcel that could be integrated into the park as hikeable property. Councilmember Whyte looked forward to having a place for all residents to enjoy.

Councilmember Pelaez noted that there was an Arboretum accreditation and suggested that the organization pursue national designation. He wanted to ensure that the Arboretum was free and open to the public and provided measurable results to investors such as the City of San Antonio.

Councilmember Pelaez commented that tree species were being threatened throughout the world and asserted that this was an important asset to provide education and ensure preservation.

Councilmember Pelaez noted that Council District 8 had an all-ability park named Dan Markson Park and suggested using the research for this park to help with the new accessible park desired by Bexar County. Cisneros agreed and offered to take the ideas throughout the entire arboretum property so that the entire property was accessible. Councilmember Pelaez lauded the partnership with Brooks City Base. He commented that there was a national conversation about science, public education, and conservation, and this was an important project to advance that dialogue in a positive way.

Councilmember Kaur thanked the leadership team of the Arboretum for their work and expressed excitement with the project. She asked what changes were made to the plan as a result of community engagement and recommended that the team share feedback in another community

meeting. Quinones stated that she was surprised that “Wild San Antonio” was the selected theme and the consulting team has taken this into their planning. Corser explained that input was sought from all portions of the City and it was important to see what aspects were desired. Corser noted that the development of values was important to set the guiding principles.

Councilmember Kaur noted that her residents had been asking for places for speed biking. Corser stated that speed biking might be a safety issue. Councilmember Kaur commented that a new accessible play area was being built in Brackenridge Park. She also recommended encouraging keeping trees alive across the City with the educational and research component of the Arboretum. Quinones added that the tree nursery would include this mission.

Councilmember McKee-Rodriguez noted that the southeastern quadrant of the City was disproportionately affected by chronic diseases and hoped residents could benefit from clean quality green space, nature walks, clean air, and other sustainable and life improving features. He felt that \$25 million was a steep request and suggested that other residents might need funding to fix their neighborhood parks so he requested to see the total cost of the project and a list of leveraged funds. Councilmember McKee-Rodriguez expected any investment to be accessible to the public, but he was confident that the community did not want another publicly subsidized green space where they had to pay admission.

Councilmember Courage thanked Cisneros for developing the idea and Corser for taking on the challenge to run the organization as a volunteer. He noted several parks throughout the City, with the largest ones being far away from downtown and the South Side of town, and there were many residents on the South Side that deserved a gem such as the Arboretum.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

Mayor Nirenber recessed the meeting into Executive Session at 3:49 p.m. to discuss the following:

- A. Economic development negotiations pursuant to Texas Government Code Section 551.087 (economic development).
- B. The purchase, exchange, lease or value of real property pursuant to Texas Government Code Section 551.072 (real property).
- C. Legal issues related to litigation involving the City pursuant to Texas Government Code Section 551.071 (consultation with attorney).
- D. Legal issues relating to emergency preparedness pursuant to Texas Government Code Section 551.071 (consultation with attorney).
- E. Legal issues related to collective bargaining pursuant to Texas Government Code Section 551.071 (consultation with attorney).

Mayor Nirenberg reconvened the meeting in Open Session at 5:02 p.m. and announced that no official action had been taken in Executive Session.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further discussion, the meeting was adjourned at 5:02 p.m.

Approved

Ron Nirenberg
Mayor

Debbie Racca-Sittre
City Clerk