

The Missions Express

A New Vision for Connecting the San Antonio Missions and the River

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The Texas State RR in Palestine, TX is a model of heritage rail

Executive Summary

Links between the San Antonio Missions National Park, Downtown San Antonio and the San Antonio River have been a long-term goal of the City, the NPS, UNESCO and the San Antonio River Authority. This proposal aims to build upon previous successes by creating a rail line connecting the missions in ways that make the entire network more accessible, sustainable and enjoyable.

Note to Reader:

This report is for
informational purposes only.

It has not yet been approved
by the SART Board as official
SART policy.

It is shared here to inform
future research and
discussion on rail in our
community

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Introduction

San Antonio is the tourism capital of Texas, attracting nearly 35 million visitors and employing 140,000 people in 2022 ([source](#)). So much of this is centered upon a chain of sites along the San Antonio River, most famously the historic Alamo, but also the four other surviving Spanish Missions which form the San Antonio Missions National Historic Park, a UNESCO World Heritage site. In recent years, the Missions have become connected by an innovative and beautiful multi-use trail and linear park called the [Riverwalk Mission Reach](#). Despite this success at opening up the Missions to cycling, hiking and [boating](#), access by [public transit](#) is limited.

This proposal lays out an exciting new opportunity for recreation, tourism and transportation within this city, creating a community that is more accessible, sustainable and enjoyable through the development of heritage rail. This heritage rail line, already in progress but requiring buy in from the broader community, will set a new standard for our region.

Overview

The proposed system will involve primarily a single rail line, the Rockport Subdivision, which runs mostly parallel to the San Antonio River from the Lone Star Complex in Southtown to Elmendorf in the southeast ([roughly 11 miles](#)), along with a small segment of the Del Rio Subdivision between the former Lone Star Brewery site and the Sunset Station on the east side of downtown. The tentative proposal would be for thrice daily tourism rail, likely only on weekends and holidays for the time being, leaving from Sunset Station and stopping in each of the four southern missions before returning. There would also be the potential for longer trips to Elmendorf for dinner trains and specialty excursion events (like the [Day Out With Thomas](#), or holiday themed events).

This train would be operated by the San Antonio Rail Heritage Museum (SARHM). Based in Elmendorf, TX, this non-profit museum has been engaged in the process of lovingly restoring a number of historic railroad cars for the purpose of creating excursion rail links to Downtown San Antonio, and beyond. A model for this system would be the [Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Rail](#), a non-profit heritage rail operator that works in partnership with the National Park System in Cuyahoga Valley NP, just south of Cleveland, Ohio which operates regular thrice daily service on Wednesdays to Sundays. Similarly, the [Oil Creek and Titusville Railroad](#) travels through – and has stations within - Pennsylvania's Oil Creek State Park near Erie.

This plan has three primary benefits: (1) accessibility; (2) sustainability and; (3) enjoyability.

Accessibility

Currently, there are three primary ways to visit the San Antonio Missions: by car, by bicycle or by foot, with the latter two options being along the Mission Reach Trail. While there is a bus route connecting the sites (VIA route #40), it is not widely known or advertised and not a tourist-oriented service. This means that for individuals with mobility-related disabilities or other disabilities that prevent both driving and cycling, the sites are not particularly welcoming or friendly. For those who might be able to cycle out the 16-mile length of the Mission Reach but would be challenged returning, the limited cycle racks (both in number and in their inability to take e-bikes) on the VIA busses limits their ability to make an easy round trip. This means that the Missions National Park system favors the able-bodied.

The creation of a train with stations easily accessed from each of the National Park units, one which travels several round trips per day and has the ability to take many bicycles, will open up the potential for wider and more universal accessibility to these unique locations.

Sustainability

Currently, the park systems (national park and local linear parks) are most commonly accessed through private vehicle. This is understandable given the lack of rail-based transit in San Antonio beyond Amtrak and the general car-friendly nature of Texas. However, we can – and should – seek to improve and to find more sustainable ways of connecting our communities and heritage.

In general, rail is a more sustainable system, with a lower carbon footprint and considerable efficiencies of energy use. This benefit is less robust for steam power, such as that which would be used by SARHM. However, the SARHM engine requires a complete overhaul regardless and could be potentially outfitted to use pioneering forms of [biocoal](#), such as that developed by the [Coalition for Sustainable Rail](#) in Minnesota, or being pioneered in [UK Heritage Rail contexts](#). However, even if historic coal systems were in place, it appears that they would [still produce less carbon emissions than driving private cars](#).

A rail line would also decrease demand and wear-and-tear on roads and, especially, parking lots, decreasing the amount of land taken by impervious hard surfaces and decreasing stormwater runoff into the River. Fewer tourists visiting by private car would also mean less traffic, congestion and noise in impacted neighborhoods.

Enjoyability

From the [Peruvian IncaRail](#) to Machu Picchu to the [revived Orient Express](#) from Paris to Istanbul, around the world high quality, heritage-style rail sets the highest bars for enjoyment and luxury travel. Beautifully restored historic stations (or their facsimile as we would have at most Mission Express stops), Harry Potter-esque train cars, and delicious food all create experiences that truly define their locations. A beautiful, historic Mission Express train line would fit exactly this type of description.

Because of this enjoyability, heritage rail can serve as a significant draw to a location. For example, in Cuyahoga NP, the heritage rail is one of the largest draws and interconnects disparate locations across the park, providing [significant economic benefits](#) to the community.

SARHM's Current Status

The feasibility of this plan relies upon its coherence with the already-existing plans of SARHM. Despite a lack of deep pockets, the volunteers at SARHM have demonstrated over and over their technical skill and willingness to get creative in creating a revived heritage train. Their most impressive project of yet has been the complete overhaul and restoration of [“The Alamo”, a dining car dating from 1926](#).



The "Alamo": The Crown Jewel of SAHRM's Restoration Project, before and after

However, this is hardly SAHRM's only asset: they also own the [#794, a 1926 steam powered locomotive](#) from the Southern Pacific Line. Currently stable but not usable without restoration, it sits in front of historic Sunset Station in Downtown San Antonio. They have also restored a historic caboose. Just as important as rolling stock, SAHRM owns a facility including a museum and rail maintenance yard in Elemendorf at the proposed terminus of the Missions Express line.

SAHRM's long-term goal is the creation of a fully functional train consist including locomotive and passenger cars for the purpose of operating diner trains, tourist service and special event service. At the moment, they have the expertise and enthusiasm but not the resources to pull this off.



SAHRM's Locomotive #794 in front of Sunset Station, Downtown San Antonio

The Proposed Route

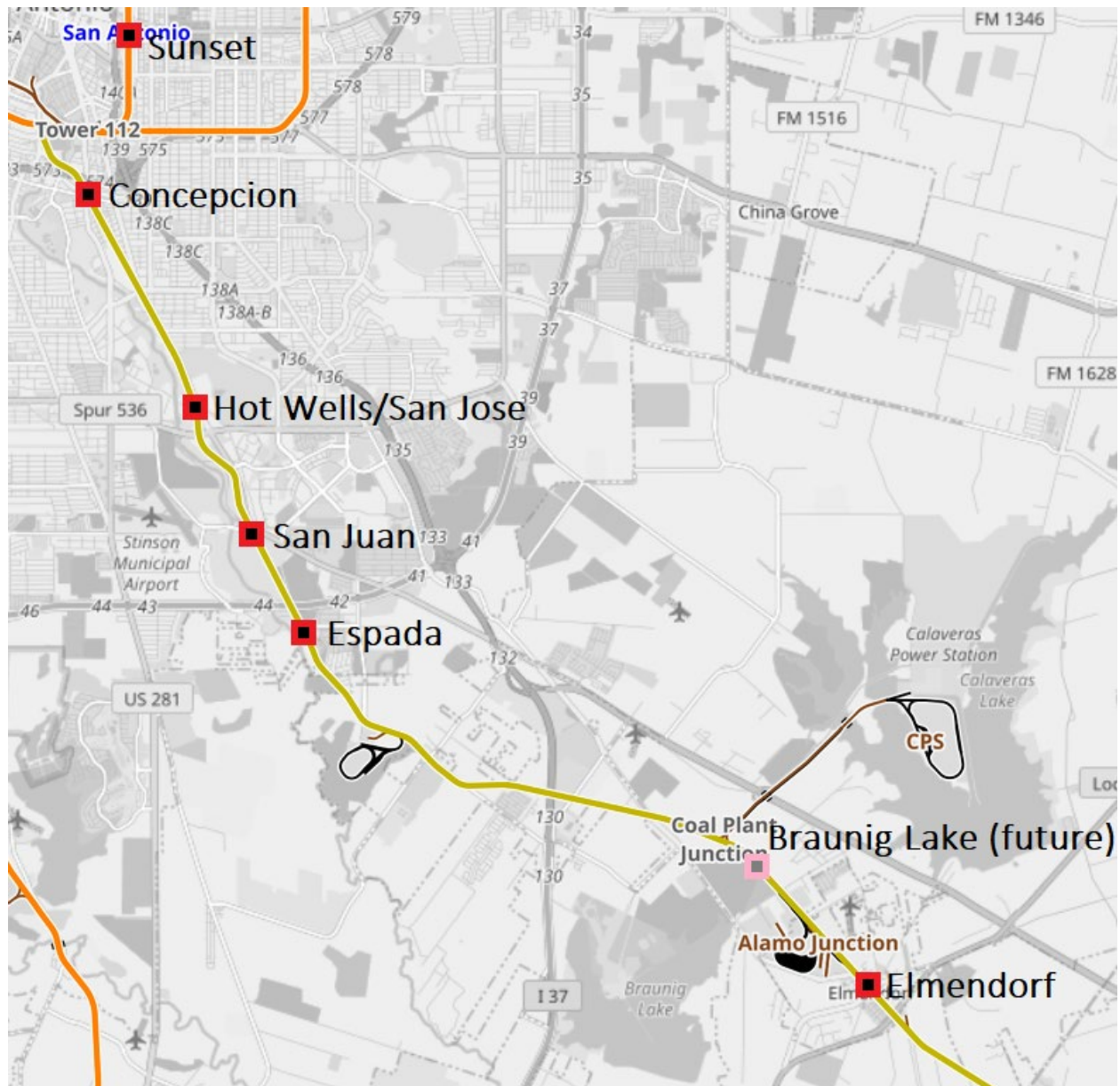
This plan involves the construction of five stations and the use of one existing station (the current Amtrak station at historic Sunset Station). These stations would be strung along the currently operating Rockport Subdivision, whose primary role currently is transporting freight, especially fuel for CPS Energy's Calaveras Power Station. Each of these stations would be situated near one of the historic Missions – currently a multi-site Nation Historic Park and UNESCO World Heritage Site.



Shimonada Station in Ehime, Japan shows how simple a train station can be.

With the exception of the already-existing Sunset Station and Elmendorf complexes, these stations can, at least at first, be rather simple affairs similar to Shimonada Station in Ehima Prefecture, Japan (see the photo above). This is because ticketing could be done primarily online, not requiring a station facility. A train with a hop-on-hop-off system and multiple daily round trips could allow people to freely explore

the Missions over the course of the day and not need more than a single ticket. For success, these small stations will need to be accessible, with a friendly atmosphere and pleasant design.



Station #1: Sunset Station

Most passengers would likely begin their service with the Missions Express at Sunset Station, located on the eastern edge of Downtown San Antonio. Sunset is one of the two historic stations at the heart of the city and remains in public ownership as a VIA property. While the main part of the station has been converted to a nightclub and event venue, an annex remains that provides Amtrak service and there are still functional, shaded platforms and rail. Sunset is a 15 minute walk from the Alamo, 10 minutes from the famed Riverwalk and 10 minutes to the Tower of the Americas and the Convention Center.



Sunset Station

Station #2: Concepción

At the intersection of Roosevelt and Steves' Avenues, a five-minute walk to the Concepcion Mission. This would likely be the most difficult of the stations to construct as it is the only one located in an area without significant open, public land (or an already-existing station). A more distant, alternative location could potentially be located at the LoneStar Complex, itself a popular tourist destination along the River.



Potential Location for Concepción Station

Station #3: Hot Wells and San Jose

The Hot Wells station would be located in [Hot Wells Park](#), Bexar County's newest park. The Rockland Subdivision runs on the eastern border of the park, in an area that is otherwise undeveloped. Historically, there was a station here and this track served the clientele of the grand hotels and bathhouses located here. This location also has a direct link to the Riverwalk, with crossings to access the San Jose Mission on the far side of the river and other local sites like the Charro Association arena and the Mission Marquee Plaza.



Potential Location for Hot Wells Station

Station #4: San Juan and Aqueduct

On Villamain Road, this station is located within the publicly-owned borders of the San Juan Park, a short walk through the woods to the historic mission and a somewhat longer walk across a nearby bridge to the Espada Aqueduct on the far side of the river.



Potential Location for San Juan Station

Station #5: Espada and the Medina Greenway

Also along Villamain Road, this station would be located along the multi-use trails on public land near Mission Espada. This would conveniently connect to the Medina River Greenway trail.



Potential Location for Espada Station

Station #6: Elmendorf

Located at SAHRM's headquarters and the Elmendorf Library, this station will serve as the southern terminus. There would likely be a need for upgrades and extension to the existing trackage here as well as improvements to the buildings and facilities.



Current Location of SAHRM

Future Expansion

There are a number of ways that this system, once up and running, could be fruitfully expanded. One would be the eventual creation of a station and park on Victor Braunig Lake. This artificial reservoir is owned and managed by CPS Energy, itself owned by the City of San Antonio. Both Victor Braunig Lake and nearby Calaveras Lake [have public parks and allow for boating](#). However, the rail line runs along the northeast edge of the lake, opposite the park. The construction of a station stop could open the possibility of the rail line providing access for residents of San Antonio's southside to lake recreation opportunities without needing to have access to a car.

Further to the south, the Rockport Subdivision ends beyond Elmendorf, but a dormant rail line continues south towards Corpus Christi. These lines could potentially be someday revitalized for passenger service to Corpus and the Gulf Coast beaches. Along the way, the line passes by [Rancho de las Cabras](#), the most far-flung unit of the San Antonio Missions NP. There would be the potential for Ranger-guided excursion rail from San Antonio to this historic outpost along the San Antonio River.

The Other Benefits of This Plan

The creation of the Missions Express heritage rail service will have a number of additional benefits beyond the immediate and obvious improvements to accessibility, sustainability and enjoyability.

Helping bring SAHRM to full functionality

SAHRM has the potential to be an asset to this community far beyond its role in operating the Missions Express. SAHRM leadership wants to bring rail connectivity to the city in a wider sense, for example ferrying UTSA students from Main Campus to the Alamodome for sporting events and creating enjoyable excursion events like dinner trains and seasonal events. Outside of Mission Express service, the primary beneficiaries of heritage rail in San Antonio would not be visitors but instead residents who would be able to enjoy the amenity of excursion rail and special events.

However, the costs of renovating Locomotive #794, as well as building the necessary stations and equipment mean that SAHRM has been kneecapped from the start and has struggled to fund their endeavors. Missions Express could serve as the community impetus to final bring them into full functionality.

Increasing the accessibility of the city's parks and trail network

While impressive in its own right, the Mission Reach Riverwalk is only a small portion of the city's ever-growing [Greenways train system](#). Near Mission Espada, the Riverwalk turns into the Medina River Greenway, giving access to Medina River Natural Area and Mitchell Lake to the south and west. In the future, this trail will also continue to the north and east to the planned [Arboretum](#). When complete and interlinked, this trail system will create a vast loop around the entire city, connecting most of its principal parks and destinations. The existence of a bike-friendly Missions Express service can provide support to the success of these trails and parks. By bringing residents of downtown out to the edge of the city and the trailheads of the Greenway, it facilitates their use of the entire system rather than just the more crowded areas near downtown.

A Return to Sunset Station

Sunset Station is a true rail jewel in the heart of the city which, unfortunately, is rarely seen by anyone because it operates a nightclub – not the best venue for appreciating beautiful buildings. The current platform is in need of significant maintenance and upgrade and the addition of Mission Express service could provide the impetus for grant funds to do this work. By bringing additional, non-Amtrak trains, as well as many tourists to the Sunset Station Complex, we would increase the demands on that area and, hopefully, move towards the direction of restoring the building to viable use as a transit facility once again.

Building a Culture of Rail

While much of modern San Antonio was built on the back of the rail lines that criss-cross the city today, it is largely overlooked as a form of transit in Central Texas. It is the belief of this author that one of the great weaknesses of pro-rail campaigns in this region is a lack of a ‘culture of rail’: a sense that rail is a viable and modern form of transportation able to help alleviate the real transportation needs and problems of the city. The construction of this system would remind San Antonians of the existence of beautiful historic stations, convenient rail lines and the trains that link them together and move us towards a wider appreciation for rail.

Creating the Framework for Future Service

San Antonio lacks any form of intra-city rail service and – as limited as it is – the Missions Express would be the first rail operating solely within the city in decades (minus the delightful but not particularly useful Zoo Train). In doing so, it would require the construction of stations and facilities that could, in time, serve a dual usage not only for heritage rail but also for more conventional forms of rail-based transit.

While the Missions Express will be primarily directed at visitors to the city, if carefully structured and advertised, it could serve secondarily as a form of transit. Several of the stations, specifically Concepción and Hot Wells, are located in well populated areas and locals might be willing to use it as a tool for easily visiting the city center. If there were reduced fares for Bexar County residents, this could further incentivize this type of use.

Challenges

The challenges to this project are primarily: financial, logistical and technical.

The **financial** challenge is the need to raise the necessary funds to: (1) build or upgrade necessary stations; (2) refurbish the Locomotive #794; (3) make necessary track adaptations; (4) build out the maintenance and storage facility at Elmendorf; (5) expand the number of cars in the SAHRM consist; (6) properly advertise the project.

The **logistical** challenges would involve coordination with necessary partners, especially SAHRM and Union Pacific, and the increase of the institutional capacities of SAHRM to allow for regular service.

The **technical** challenges would involve upgrading and harmonizing the historic consist to function together, improvements to trackage and signaling, and the necessary training of train crews. More immediately, there would be a need for preliminary expert consulting to develop the proposals to put before the Federal Railroad Administration and other government oversight agencies.

Potential Partners

This project involves many elements and would require coordination between many actors. In addition to those whose involvement is required, there are other groups who might be able to assist and strengthen the viability of the project.

Necessary Partners

SAHRM: This project is a non-starter without the enthusiastic participation of SAHRM which brings expertise, facilities, labor and train equipment.

Union Pacific Railroad: The owner of the tracks in question, UPRR would be a necessary partner for this project. UPRR has a history of collaboration with other heritage providers and has [expressed interest](#) in expanding passenger options in San Antonio.

National Park Service: Much of the land used for future stations, as well as the necessary trails connecting stations to the rest of the parks, would be on National Park Service lands. The NPS has a history of partnership with railroads in other areas of the country (not only Cuyahoga, but also [Grand Canyon](#), and [Glacier](#)) and may be an enthusiastic partner.

Local Government: The participation of the City of San Antonio, Bexar County and the VIA transit agency would likely be necessary for success. Some of the park lands, rights of way are owned by these various local entities and their participation would likely be needed. Meanwhile, VIA owns Sunset Station, the proposed northern terminus.

Possible Partners

San Antonio River Authority: SARA has a history of investing recreation along the river corridor, including in the Riverwalk, the Missions and various other parks. It may be source of funding, political aid and expertise.

Texas Transportation Museum: San Antonio's [other train museum](#) has links to SAHRM and might be able to provide technical assistance, and even potentially loaned rolling stock.

State of Texas: While Texas does not have a long track record of investing in rail, funds and technical assistance may exist at the State Level to help leverage the program. At the least, state-level representatives might be willing to champion the project.

Federal Government: The Federal Government (outside of the NPS) may be a source of funding. For example, Cuyahoga NP and Scenic Railroad [received \\$14 million](#) from the Great American Outdoors Act in 2022 to improve tracks and trails. Other funds may be available for rail improvement projects under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Act.

Advocacy Groups: Groups advocating for transit (such as [San Antonians for Rail Transit](#)), sustainability, economic development and historic preservation may all be interested in this project and willing to support it in various ways.

Next Steps

This is a preliminary document produced by a private individual associated with San Antonians for Rail Transit – it is a long way from here to completion of this project. Next steps would be:

- (1) Approval of the project by SART as an advocacy goal
- (2) Reaching out to SAHRM to bring them on board
- (3) Finding local champions among elected officials
- (4) Promoting the project to Necessary Partners and the general public
- (5) Developing a more in-depth study
- (6) Finding an agency to fund a formal study