

Executive Summary:

AARO's 2024 Austin–San Antonio Leaders Survey

The Austin–San Antonio super-region, one of the fastest-growing areas in the nation, is uniquely positioned as a driver of economic, cultural, and environmental innovation. The 2024 Austin–San Antonio Leaders Survey, engaging 355 leaders from 55 cities, provides a robust understanding of the challenges, opportunities, and strategic pathways for the region as it continues its rapid transformation. These findings underscore the necessity of bold leadership, cross-sector collaboration, and innovative strategies to ensure a sustainable and prosperous future for all communities.

Methodology

This survey was designed to capture the perspectives of key regional stakeholders, including leaders in government, nonprofit organizations, education, business, and healthcare. Key elements of the methodology include:

- **Targeted Outreach:** The survey was distributed to a curated population of 1,169 individuals sourced from AARO's extensive network and regional leadership directories, ensuring representation across sectors and geographies.
- **Data Collection:** Conducted via email using SurveyMonkey over a 17-day period (September 3–20, 2024), the survey achieved a 30.3% response rate, with 355 participants providing insights.
- **Geographic Scope:** Respondents represented 55 cities across the Austin–Round Rock–San Marcos and San Antonio–New Braunfels Metropolitan Statistical Areas, reflecting the diverse priorities and concerns of the super-region.
- **Focus Groups:** After the survey closed, respondents were invited to participate in 1 of 3 focus groups to discuss the preliminary findings. 42 leaders participated in these sessions, offering additional insights into the priorities, challenges, and opportunities facing the super-region.

The research provides a valuable snapshot of regional dynamics, offering actionable insights for addressing critical challenges.

Key Findings

1. Water and Energy: Sustaining Growth Through Reliable Resources

Water and energy are the lifelines of the super-region's economic and community well-being:

- **Water Sustainability:** Recognized as the top infrastructure priority, 59% of leaders identified water supply as a critical issue requiring super-regional collaboration. The rapid population growth, coupled with increasing climate variability, amplifies the urgency for sustainable water management strategies.
- **Energy Reliability:** As the region attracts energy-intensive industries, ensuring dependable and resilient energy systems has become a pressing concern. Leaders emphasized that investments in renewable energy and grid modernization are vital to sustaining the super-region's economic momentum.

Efforts such as the San Antonio Water System (SAWS) and CPS Energy collaboration offer promising models for regional cooperation, but greater alignment is needed to meet future demands.

2. Housing Affordability: A Crisis Undermining Regional Competitiveness

Housing affordability emerged as a critical barrier to maintaining the super-region's appeal:

- **Housing Affordability:** Leaders in Austin emphasized this challenge more acutely, with affordability constraints impacting talent attraction and retention. Only 34% of respondents rated their city's performance on housing availability as satisfactory, underscoring a significant gap between need and action.
- **Affordability Sprawl:** Leaders outside of Austin's urban core emphasized the trickling effect of housing scarcity on suburban, ex-urban, and rural housing markets, noting the impact of higher costs pricing out local residents as urban sprawl pushes people further away from center city.

Innovative approaches, such as Austin's Affordable Housing Bonds and San Antonio's Strategic Housing Implementation Plan, provide frameworks for scaling affordable housing solutions. AARO can play a key role in fostering regional cooperation to address this shared challenge.

3. Workforce Development: Building a Talent Pipeline for Tomorrow

The survey highlights workforce and education as pivotal to the super-region's long-term competitiveness:

- **Childcare:** Availability, cost, and quality are significant concerns, with nearly 40% of leaders rating their city’s performance poorly. Addressing this gap is essential to unlocking workforce potential, particularly for working families.
- **Economic Mobility:** Leaders see limited upward mobility as a barrier to equitable growth, with city performance ratings averaging 3.1 out of 5.
- **Training Alignment and Workforce Development:** Workforce training initiatives, such as the Austin Infrastructure Academy and Good Jobs Challenge, are recognized as impactful. Expanding these programs across the super-region can address industry-specific talent shortages.

A coordinated regional effort to align workforce training with high-growth sectors, including advanced manufacturing and healthcare, is essential for maintaining the super-region’s economic edge.

4. Infrastructure Challenges: A Call for Super-Regional Solutions

Infrastructure issues dominate the list of priorities requiring regional collaboration:

- **Public Transportation and Traffic Congestion:** With 61% of leaders identifying traffic as the top challenge, there is a clear mandate for unified transportation planning, including rail development and expanded public transit options.
- **Housing and Energy:** Beyond water, energy reliability and housing availability remain at the forefront of infrastructure concerns at the super-regional level, reinforcing the need for targeted investments and innovative policies.
- **Environmental Stewardship:** Leaders emphasized the importance of protecting the Hill Country and advancing regional climate resilience as critical to preserving the region’s quality of life.

By prioritizing infrastructure investments and advocating for state and federal funding, the super-region can address these persistent bottlenecks and unlock new opportunities for growth.

Opportunities for Action

The survey findings offer a roadmap for AARO and its members to catalyze change through bold, collective action:

1. **Strengthening Water and Energy Systems:**

- Advocate for regional water management plans that integrate innovative technologies and sustainable practices.
 - Partner with utilities to modernize energy systems, ensuring resilience against climate and economic pressures.
 - Use shared water and energy priorities as a unified starting point for collaboration by appealing to state and federal entities for joint funding.
2. Expanding Affordable Housing Solutions:
- Foster partnerships between public agencies, private developers, and nonprofits to deliver scalable housing solutions.
 - Advocate for regional housing policies that balance growth with affordability, ensuring equitable access to opportunities.
3. Investing in Workforce and Education:
- Expand successful workforce initiatives like the Infrastructure Academy across the super-region.
 - Address childcare barriers to enable broader workforce participation and economic mobility.
4. Elevating Regional Infrastructure:
- Develop a super-regional transportation plan, focusing on traffic reduction, rail connectivity, and equitable transit access.
 - Promote environmental stewardship and climate resilience to enhance the region's sustainability and appeal.
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Conclusion

The Austin–San Antonio super-region is at a crossroads, facing significant challenges but also unparalleled opportunities. This survey reveals a clear path forward: prioritize collaboration, embrace innovation, and commit to actionable solutions that reflect the region's shared values. AARO and its members have a unique opportunity to lead this transformation, ensuring the super-region not only adapts to growth but thrives as a model of inclusive, sustainable success.