

TexasMonthly

How Green Is My Bayou? Houston's Quality of Life Coalition Beginnings

Houston, the energy capital of the world, wants to be the environmental capital as well. Good luck!

BY MIMI SWARTZ - SEPTEMBER 2008

Perhaps it is not so surprising that the turning point in Houston's uneasy, often contemptuous relationship with its less-than-pristine environment came in the form of a political ad for Al Gore. The moment occurred during the 2000 presidential campaign. For those who might need a refresher, at the time it was fine with just about everyone in Houston that a brownish haze graced the horizon, that occasional chemical plant explosions in the Ship Channel area announced themselves with booms that shook the ground from miles away, that the oily aroma that fouled an otherwise glorious morning was described by local business leaders, accompanied by knowing winks, as "the smell of money." But then came Gore's TV spot, which implied that the rest of the country might become like Texas—which, of course, meant like Houston—if a certain Texas governor became president. This message was accompanied by shots of belching smokestacks, massive oil refineries, and a mother tending to her ailing child—all because, the narration went, George W. Bush was giving tax breaks to oil companies while opposing health care for thousands of kids. "Texas ranks last in air quality," the ad pointed out.

While none of this was news to Houstonians, the concern of mortified community leaders was that the ad was also running in cities from which they were trying to lure businesses. After years of dismissing as whiners the small minority who suggested that pollution was doing damage not just to Houston's image but also to its economic future, community leaders finally got their wake-up call. "It really had a negative impact on employers and employees moving here," said Deborah January-Bevers, the executive director of Houston's Quality of Life Coalition, who works closely with the Greater Houston Partnership, the city's version of a chamber of commerce. In bygone times, she would have been the enemy. That was before civic leaders finally realized that the bargain they had made—to accept an ugly, polluted city in return for a booming business climate—was a losing one in the twenty-first century. If Houston didn't change, new businesses wouldn't come here, old businesses wouldn't stay, and the city's collective dark fears—that it would end up poor, backward, and, worst of all, ignored—would come true.

What has happened since has been an all-out effort to change Houston's identity. Consider Discovery Green, the lovely new park across from the George R. Brown Convention Center, which even on weekdays is filled with giddy kids, dogs, and parents, cavorting in the fountains, picnicking by the pond, or just relaxing under the oaks, people-watching. On Interstate 10, on the west side of town, pine saplings and blooming crape myrtles have replaced billboards. The refurbished promenade and reflecting pool at Hermann Park evoke Paris (well, almost). Landscaped hike-and-bike trails along Buffalo Bayou lead to secret gardens downtown; at night they glow with blue or white lights, depending on the phase of the moon. (Incidentally, canoeing that same route no longer requires a gas mask or a wet suit.) Off Beltway 8, the once weedy flood-control field that is now Arthur Storey Park fills up in the morning with people practicing tai chi. New public buildings must meet the latest LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification standards—the national benchmark

for energy efficiency—and, except for libraries and new fire stations, are supposed to be cooled to no lower than 76 degrees. Luxurious green homes sell for \$1 million and up, while in Montgomery County, Land Tejas is building green housing starting at \$170,000.

What seems to have occurred overnight has actually been a slow, instructive process. Houston's best, and worst, quality has always been its confidence in its own future, but its vision of that future has remained tied to energy. Despite noble attempts at diversification during the great oil bust of the mid-eighties, at least 43 percent of the economic base still comes from things extracted from the ground, and the idea that Houston is too tied to oil and gas is still one the populace has had to grapple with mightily.

The first serious calls for change actually occurred before Gore's ad. Rice University sociology professor Stephen Klineberg, who has tracked the city's economic and demographic changes for 27 years, regards mid-October 1999 as the local equivalent of Pearl Harbor. During a six-day period, *USA Today* ran a story bearing the headline "Houston (cough) . . . we have a problem (cough)," while the *Los Angeles Times* was celebrating the news that Houston had surpassed L.A. as the U.S. city with the worst air quality. "Everyone began to realize Houston had no chance of making it in the new economy if the perception was that it was not just flat and hot, but also ugly and dangerously polluted," Klineberg said.

One of the most influential—and most surprising—advocates for environmental change was the Greater Houston Partnership. Eight members, including future mayor Bill White, formed the Quality of Life Coalition, and they settled on four things that could make the biggest difference in the shortest amount of time: planting trees and landscaping; removing billboards; improving parks, bayous, and trails; and cleaning up litter, graffiti, and vacant lots. Soon, 85 businesses and organizations had endorsed their plan. White's election as mayor in 2003 ensured that Houston's nascent green movement would become official city policy. He spoke the language of the business community: enlightened self-interest. He was a highly successful trial lawyer-turned-CEO of a global energy corporation and a former deputy secretary of energy in the Clinton administration—the embodiment of all Houston wanted to be. White preached that the green movement should be the pro-business agenda for Houston.

Before you could say "reelection campaign," private developers raised \$45 million for downtown revitalization, and a business-government campaign to plant a million trees got under way. White appointed no-nonsense Elena Marks as director of health and environmental policy. A toothless job under White's predecessor, it became a bully pulpit from which White, Marks, and then—Dallas mayor Laura Miller challenged and defeated Texas Utilities' attempt to build eleven new coal-fired power plants that could have had a devastating effect on air quality in their two cities. Half the city's automobile fleet were converted to Priuses. Energy-saving devices went on soft drink vending machines in city buildings. Now Houston is the nation's number one municipal purchaser of green power, and the city government gets 25 percent of its power from wind energy.

The partnership even took the green campaign to Washington in search of federal funds for initiatives such as tree planting. "When we first went to Congress with important business leaders," January-Beyers told me, "we were laughed out of a couple of congressional offices. They are quite enlightened now."

The ultimate heresy, for a populace that reveled in chaos, was an interest in developing a master plan for the city that recognized that Houston has six corridors (such as the Texas Medical Center and the Galleria) rather than a single hub. The plan, which is in its formative stages, envisions five light-rail lines. This new, green Houston will be denser than the current version; the model is fast-growing Midtown, which is a mixture of high-rise lofts and mid-rise condo projects, with stores and

restaurants at street level. The idea is to reduce the number of SUV-driving trips from downtown to the Galleria and to have people work closer to their homes.

So how much of this can become a reality, and how much will remain a pipe dream? That depends on a lot of things, not the least of which are who succeeds White in 2010 (he is term-limited) and whether his replacement can continue to rally the business community behind the idea of a greener Houston. It is also true that the long-term goal of making Houston livable will always have to compete with the short-term interests of local companies. The destruction of a portion of the much-loved art deco River Oaks Shopping Center to make way for a hulking chain bookstore represents business as usual, as does the felling, deep in the night, of a number of oak trees lining Kirby Drive. Ditto the fight to build a high-rise condominium in the already congested Rice University area. Banners and bumper stickers protesting the project abound, but it may still go forward, even over White's objections.

Some heavy lifting remains ahead. Cleaning up the air and water will require Houston to do some eating of its own—the oil refiners, the petrochemical companies, and the developers. Bayou waterways have yet to be brought into federal clean-water compliance; the region still has the highest emission rates of the carcinogen benzene in the country, much of which is produced in adjacent counties. White, fed up with foot-dragging, recently filed a formal petition with the Environmental Protection Agency challenging the EPA's emissions estimates for refineries and petrochemical plants in the Houston area as far too low; the city has also begun conducting air-quality tests with its own mobile air-monitoring unit. But even if everyone were to join the green team, Houston would remain a city built on a swamp, with a Calcutta-like climate that contributes to the unhealthiness of the air. And, of course, Houstonians remain wedded to their cars and are skeptical of public transit, no matter how toxic the freeways.

Still, the mayor's office is optimistic about the future, believing that the economic case for going green has been made. There is even hope that a cleaned-up Houston might reduce complaints about the weather. "If people feel the air they are breathing is safe and they can canoe down the bayou," January-Beyers told me, "they won't think the heat is such a big deal." For that, I suspect, we will have to wait a very long time, but it's a Houston I'd truly like to see.