

A Conversation with Annise Parker

Playing to Houston's Strengths: Internationalism, Energy, Innovation

Annise Parker's six years as Houston's 61st mayor concluded in January. She was previously city comptroller and served on the city council. Parker, a second-generation Houstonian, earlier spent 20 years in the energy industry. She reviews her time in public service and the challenges Texas' largest city confronts.

Q. Even as a native Houstonian, what was the most surprising discovery you made during your nearly two-decade career as an elected municipal official?

How international Houston is. The globalization of Houston has occurred at a phenomenal rate. It is really clear when you drive down a street with a Hindu temple, Buddhist shrine and African Episcopal church within eyeshot of each other.

I regularly saw parts of Houston I never knew existed. In part because Houston has grown so rapidly that there is more to know and see all the time. Also, because the "built" environment is so easily and routinely erased and replaced.

Q. How much can Houston move beyond its roots as the global energy capital?

We are and will remain the global energy capital. When I graduated from college in the late '70s, the oil and gas industry was 80 percent of the Houston economy. It is 40 percent today. Not because the industry declined, but because the other sectors of our economy have expanded and will continue to do so—some by design and strategic direction and some organically.

Houston focused on its strengths in medicine, the Port of Houston and NASA/aerospace and charted growth strategies in all of them. At the same time, manufacturing has taken off due to the combination of workforce, a positive regulatory climate and affordable land.

Q. What are the greatest challenges facing Houston and how can they be solved?

There are two, and they impact each other. Like many other government jurisdictions, Houston has a large and growing underfunded pension debt. Unless and until this is solved in a way that provides security to existing pensioners and stability and affordability to taxpayers, Houston will struggle with funding both the fundamentals of government and new challenges. Unfortunately, only the Legislature can solve this pension problem, and it has declined either to provide a solution or to allow Houston autonomy.

The other issue is flooding and drainage. Houston was built in a location that flooded long before there was a single human-erected structure here. It will always struggle with water management. Moving water in Houston is like trying to drain a pool table without tilting the table. It is flat, has gumbo clay soil that absorbs water poorly and lies between whatever rain falls in central Texas and the ocean. When the tide comes in, water flowing through Houston stops moving.

We can hold the line by continuing policies that encourage less use of impervious cover, more onsite detention, conservation of open space and sustainable infrastructure. Drainage can be improved by completing more local, state and federal detention and retention projects. This takes time. But it also takes money. ReBuild Houston, our street and drainage funding plan, and the drainage

fee instituted in 2010 will help; the fee added \$100 million more funding a year without increasing debt. But there are several billion dollars' worth of needed projects.

Q. Much has been made about Houston's absence of zoning. To what degree will that be an issue in Houston's future?

I started my adulthood as a believer in zoning. I bought my first house in the city of Bellaire—the largest of nine small, zoned city islands completely surrounded by Houston—and really liked the stability. Later, as a homeowner in Houston and a civic club leader, I campaigned for the last zoning vote. After I became more conversant with the larger city and with the dynamics of city growth and development, I changed my views for both practical and philosophical reasons.

You can't easily retrofit zoning onto the Houston of today. And I saw how our flexibility allowed the tremendous growth we've experienced and the transformation of a declining neighborhood or old warehouse tracts into vibrant urban enclaves without pricing our workforce out of close-in housing. It also helped during the recession of the late 2000s because our property values stayed close to the natural market values.

Q. What are Houston's underutilized assets and how can they be turned into a competitive economic advantage?

Even though the institutions of the Texas Medical Center are one of our largest economic drivers and some of our biggest employers, we can do better. We are performing cutting-edge medicine and excel at patient care. But when a Houstonian develops a new medical device or proves the efficacy of the latest cancer fighting drug, those products need to be commercialized here; both the manufacturing and the venture capital need to be Houston-based.

In a city in which 1-in-4 residents is foreign born, the world is our marketplace. Every language of business spoken anywhere in the world is spoken in Houston by native speakers who have cultural and communal connections



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into those countries. We must continue to build bridges around the world by expanding our airport offerings with new international flights on both domestic and foreign-flag carriers, work closely with our large and growing consular corps on business development initiatives, and use every tool available—the Export-Import Bank of the United States being one—to assist local companies in doing business overseas.

Q. There has been periodic discussion of NASA consolidating operations. What would a change at NASA mean to Houston?

Being home to NASA Mission Control is important financially, culturally and emotionally, and not necessarily in that order. NASA remains a very large employer, both of government employees and contractors. Our federal government has made massive investments in the physical and intellectual infrastructure of NASA in Houston. We don't want to see that wasted by parceling off work to satisfy short-term political demands.

But it's more than that. Houston and NASA have grown up together in the 50 years of the space program. Astronauts have been our neighbors, friends and inspiration. No community is more passionately committed to supporting space exploration. That's one of the reasons that Houston's designation as a spaceport was important.

The end of the space shuttle program was a blow, and it forced us to better understand the interrelated strengths of aerospace, energy and medicine for our region and to work together more strategically across those sectors.

Q. How did Houston become a different place during your six years as mayor? What were your biggest

accomplishments, greatest disappointments?

We made unprecedented investments in our park system. The Bayou Greenways initiative will expand park space, hike and bike connectivity and help reconnect every neighborhood to the outdoors. A new skate park and Buffalo Bayou Park are magnets for residents and visitors, and the completion of the BMX [bike] park and Emancipation Park will be as well.

No other American city is making more sustained investments in infrastructure. Our water and sewer system is now self-sustained, and we are investing for the future. Rebuild Houston has put us on the right path for street and drainage improvements. Metro has transformed mass transit with the new light-rail lines and a reimagined, data-driven bus route system.

We've created management efficiencies. The city provides higher quality and more consistent services with thousands fewer employees than in the past.

We've been nationally recognized for our 60 percent drop in homelessness and for effectively ending veterans' homelessness. Thinking creatively and collaboratively helped us achieve our sobering center, which frees up jail space, public safety personnel and the municipal court systems.

I'm proud of my time in office, but there were bumps in the road. The single biggest problem we face is the underfunded employee pensions; I tried everything I could think of to change that. I am also still frustrated that Houstonians voted down the use of cameras for enforcement of red-light compliance. I know that red-light running shot up after repeal and fear that people have died as a result. Voter repeal of the Houston Equal Rights Ordinance, HERO, was an embarrassment to our national image as a tolerant and welcoming place and a profound personal disappointment.

Q. During Robert Lanier's term as mayor (1992–98), Houston pursued buses over rail mass transit. With urban sprawl and traffic issues, was that a mistake?

We need both, or rather all of the above, when it comes to transit. We need commuter rail, park-and-ride lots, bus rapid transit, bike lanes and trails, and better freeways also. On my watch, we vastly expanded light rail by adding three new lines to our original line. Rail extended down some of our most heavily traveled bus corridors, so they are less congested, less polluted, the pavement lasts longer and development will cluster along those lines.

But those 23 miles of rail are available to only a tiny fraction of the residents of this region. That would be true even in a traditional city with a downtown ringed by urban and then suburban development. In a city like Houston that has multiple existing commercial nodes and no zoning, flexibility is important. Buses are the workhorses of a transit system.

Q. Houston vs. Dallas—still rivals? What underpins their differences?

The rivalry is more myth than reality, but it is fun to spin it out. The cities have different climates, cultures and business strengths. We compete in professional sports. The important thing is that three of America's top 10 cities [by some measures of population] are in Texas.

Q. What's next for Annise Parker?

I have just been appointed a fellow at the Doerr Institute for New Leaders at Rice University. I'm excited about engaging the students and trust my business and political experience will have some relevance for them. I don't know whether there is another political race in my future, but I intend to keep my options open if the right executive position opens up.