



Q&A
Annise Parker

SOURCE OF ENERGY —Houston

Preface

Houston, in oil-rich Texas, isn't a city you might associate with progressive or green credentials. And yet its inhabitants have just re-elected Annise Parker, a liberal who has put renewable energy firmly on the agenda, as its mayor.

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Houston is home to a \$15bn (€11bn) complex for manufacturing and processing petrochemicals, and city officials like to call it the energy capital of the world. So it's incongruous that this urban equivalent of a peacocks nest gets one-third of its municipal energy from renewable sources - and that its mayor, Annise Parker, won the 2011 US Mayors' Climate Protection Awards. With Parker at its helm, the city is aiming to go greener still.

The challenges she faces over the next two years are manifold. The city added 1.2 million residents between 2000 and 2010, making it the fastest-growing US metropolitan area, and it sprawls across 1,500 sq km. All those people need infrastructure. Governing Houston is like running a mid-sized country - its annual gross product of \$400bn (€296bn) puts it on a par with Austria and Norway.

Parker, who has adopted two children and fostered one with her partner, laid out her vision for the city in conversation with MONOCLE from her office atop City Hall.

Monocle: Houston is known as the oil and gas capital of the US, and Texas is a traditional place - yet voters chose a gay mayor with green ambitions. Is all our received knowledge about the state wrong?

Annise Parker: Most of it is wrong. I think there's an attitude that Houston is some sort of redneck wasteland and it's

not - it's a big, booming, cosmopolitan, international city. Our prime objective has been to do business with other places around the world and you can't do that without being an open and welcoming place. Houston has a tradition of looking at people for what they can do rather than who they are and where they come from.

M: What kind of energy future is Houston planning for?

AP: You have to understand that I spent 20 years working in the oil and gas industry. It's still about 50 per cent of our economy and I see no indication that its going anywhere any time soon. But that doesn't mean that as a city we're not interested in reducing our carbon footprint, in improving our air, in looking for renewable energy. The city of Houston is one of the largest municipal purchasers of renewable energy in America. I believe that renewables can exist side-by-side with petroleum and fossil fuels.

M: Tell me more about your plans for a sustainable Houston.

AP: I hired a director of sustainability for the city and her responsibility is to make sure we make continued progress. We have aggressively moved the city to the use of renewable energy, and as we rebuild city buildings everything is LEED certified. We have an incentive programme that encourages the private sector to be greener in terms of waste management, electricity or water savings. It might surprise some folks to know that we were also one of first US municipal purchasers of hybrid vehicles and we've taken delivery of some of the first all-electric vehicles in any public fleet in the US - we just got our first Nissan Leafs.

M: Houston has grown more than any other US city in the past decade. What kind of pressure is this putting on the city?

AP: All of the environmental pressures that you can think of. What do we do with the rubbish, the street drainage infrastructure, the water and sewerage lines? Do we have enough roads for all those cars to go on?

M: Houston is a sprawling car city. Do you see this as a problem?

AP: We're trying to make up for it with the aggressive expansion of our light rail system and are exploring commuter rail options coming into the city. I will have considered myself a failure if, when I leave the mayor's office, we haven't com-

pleted the three new light rail lines currently under construction.

M: Why does Houston have such a large diplomatic presence?

AP: There are 94 foreign consulates in Houston, the third-highest number in the US. About 20 per cent of Houston residents are foreign-born. There are multinational companies that rotate their personnel into the city, the Port of Houston is America's largest foreign port, and the Texas Medical Center is arguably the largest medical complex in the world. All of those have really strong international connections that we try to burnish.

M: To what extent is Texas politics the domain of the good ole boys and what's it like jumping into that as a woman?

AP: It's not just about Texas politics. I would point out that of the largest American cities - places with over a million people - there have been a total of 10 female mayors in history. There is definitely a glass ceiling for mayors. We have to deal with things that male candidates don't: an inordinate interest in hairstyles, in make-up and fashion.

M: You're a Democrat in a Republican state. Is there much friction with the stale capital, Austin?

AP: The big cities in Texas are Democratic islands in the big red sea, so all of us mayors of Texas's larger cities have to work out an accommodation with Austin, because the state itself is so conservative. But there are few issues where you can tell the difference. There's not really a partisan way to pick up rubbish or fill potholes. I also represent about 10 per cent of the population of Texas, so it wouldn't be smart to ignore a large swathe of constituents.

M: You attracted global attention for your election as the first openly gay mayor of a major US city. Do you see yourself as a gay role model?

AP: I absolutely see myself as a gay role model and I have actually been a role model since my college days - I was a founder of my university GLBT student group. There are some differences with a lesbian in office. My life partner and I have been together 20 years. I expect her to be given all the rights and privileges of every other First Lady of the city of Houston, and for some people that's a little bit of a stretch. But she has been well received as I always have been.