

Complete Communities

An Interview with The Honorable Sylvester Turner, Mayor of Houston

EDITORS' NOTE Elected in December 2015, Sylvester Turner is serving his first four-year term as Houston's 62nd mayor. Mayor Turner's civic leadership has been nationally recognized through his service as a member of the U.S. Conference of Mayors Transportation and Communications Standing Committee, vice chair of the National Climate Action Agenda, member of the C40 and Global Covenant for Mayors for Climate and Energy and an advisory board member



The Hon. Sylvester Turner

of the African American Mayors Association. He is also the recipient of the Obtili Award, the Mexican government's highest honor. Turner has been featured in publications and news outlets such as 60 Minutes, MSNBC, CNN, CNBC, FOX News, The Wall Street Journal, Black Enterprise Magazine, Cuba Today Magazine, Ebony, The New York Times, The Washington Post and USA Today. Prior to his election as mayor, Turner served for 27 years in the Texas House as the representative for District 139. He worked on the House Appropriations Committee for 21 years and served as Speaker Pro Tem for three terms. He was appointed to several Budget Conference Committees to help balance the state's budget and served on the Legislative Budget Board. Mayor Turner is a life-long resident of Houston. He is a graduate of the University of Houston and earned a law degree from Harvard University. He began his law practice at Fulbright & Jaworski L.L.P. and later founded Barnes & Turner law firm.

What attracted you to public service and what makes public service so special for you?

This is home for me. I'm a native Houstonian. I grew up in the city. From the time that my parents had us sit down and watch the Kennedy/Nixon debate back in 1960 on a black and white television, I knew I wanted to be a part of the public arena and this was what motivated me.

Growing up, we didn't have any private health insurance, so we took the bus to a county hospital system when we were sick. I saw a lot of things growing up while waiting in the emergency room. We would get there in the morning and stay there all day. When one of my brothers needed medical assistance, the hospital said they didn't have enough beds. They gave him some medication and said, "Take him home."

I always knew that if I was given the opportunity to work to improve the healthcare delivery system, I would take advantage of it.

That is what motivated me to run initially for the Texas legislature and then it just took off from there. Being a public servant, it is gratifying to have the opportunity to address many of the ills and the inequities that I have seen and to have an opportunity to try to make things better for the people in our communities, and ultimately in our city and state and beyond.

With the gridlock in Washington, D.C. today, is change being driven at the local level?

I do agree that things are happening on the local level more so than on the national level. People are interested in results. They want to see improvements on their streets and in their neighborhoods and in their cities.

It requires everyone working together in order to bring about those results. A good example is our summer program. When I came into office, the city was offering 450 paid summer jobs for young people ages 16 to 24. There were thousands of people that applied for those jobs. We immediately ramped up that first summer to 1,100 paid summer jobs with 450 of those jobs coming from the city and the rest coming from the private sector. The second year, we ramped up to 5,000. The third year, we offered 7,500. This year, we provided 10,900 paid summer jobs for 16- to 24-year-olds. Only 450 are coming from the city. The rest are coming from the private sector. It has taken that collaboration and partnership between the public and private sector to make this happen.

I didn't want to be the mayor of two cities in one – the city of haves and the city of have nots. There have been communities that have been underserved and under-resourced for decades. We started an initiative called Complete Communities where we are initially focusing on selecting five neighborhoods that have been historically underserved and under-resourced. We're working with the private sector, financial institutions, faith-based organizations and nonprofits to leverage their resources with those of the city to provide affordable housing, better parks and green space, business and job opportunities and workforce development programs as well

as bettering neighborhood schools and transportation in these communities. We stay engaged in these communities for about two years, on average, if not longer and I recently named five more communities we will be including in the program. It requires all of us working together in order to effect those changes.

Another area I focused on was pensions. When I came into office, the unfunded liability of \$8.2 billion was costing the city \$1 million a day. Today it's \$4.03 billion without raising anybody's taxes or the city infusing a great deal of cash. That \$1 million cost a day is no more. The three credit rating agencies have given us a thumbs up. We are now, for the third consecutive year, fully paying the annual pension cost. This has taken collaborations, Democrats and Republicans, and labor and business working together. The beauty is that on the local level we're getting things done and meeting the needs of the people.

Is the Houston brand and the understanding of Houston's strengths from a work/live/play perspective well understood today?

Not outside of Houston and certainly not outside of the state of Texas. I think many people across the country and even probably in other places outside the country see Houston as the city it was 25 years ago, primarily reliant on oil and gas and perhaps as a cowboy town, so to speak. Houston has evolved quite a bit over the last 25 years. It's the energy capital of the world. There has even been diversification within the energy sector so we are not just focused on gas.

There are a lot of different things that are taking place here. The focus for the city now is on technology and innovation. We're creating an innovation hub along an innovation corridor. Companies are coming from the east coast like MassChallenge. They started in Boston and have now expanded into the city of Houston. We have companies that have been operating in Silicon Valley that are expanding their operations in what we now call #SiliconBayou.

The medical center has expanded. It's the largest medical center in the world and it is located in the city of Houston. People from outside the state of Texas don't realize that Houston is now the most diverse city in the country. One of four Houstonians is foreign-born. More than 145 languages are spoken in

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this city. Many people from outside of Texas don't know that.

They don't know that we have a strong emphasis on the arts and a strong emphasis on parks and green space throughout the city of Houston. We're also known for big events. When outsiders come and see what the city has to offer, they fall in love with the people, the 11,000 plus restaurants that are in the city, all our sporting teams along with the arts and everything else that we have to offer. I tell people all the time that we're a little bit country and a little bit chic all at the same time.

What strides have you been able to make in reforming K-12 education in Houston?

Education is a critical component to the success of any city. Unlike Chicago, Boston, New York and Philadelphia, the city does not control the school systems here in the city of Houston. There are 17 independent school districts that traverse the city of Houston with the Houston school district being the largest one in our city.

However, when I came into office, I established the first ever office of education in the city and named a director of education, Juliet Stipeche, who is a former board member and president of the school board of the Houston Independent School District.

I recognize that we've got to work hand in hand with our school systems, both at the elementary and secondary level as well as with higher education. We have a lot of young talent in the city. We have to make sure they have the necessary skillsets in order to take advantage of the opportunities that are here in the city and that are coming to the city. Without this, it is very difficult to create an integrated, robust ecosystem.

You mentioned the have and have nots and, across the country, this divide is becoming deeper. How much does income equality concern you and is some of the success that you have had in addressing this issue in Houston replicable in other parts of the country?

I think so. It's a real concern because you can't have resiliency and sustainability without having equality. That's why I focused on building Complete Communities when I came into office. We must address this divide. Innovation can take place around these communities that have been underserved and underresourced.

I still live in the same community in which I was born and bred, and that is an under-served, underresourced community. I do that as a statement to the people who are there and people that live in similar communities that I'm right here with you. I see you. I hear you. I live right here among you. It's also a signal to them that you can live and be reared in these communities and still grow up and become the mayor of the fourth largest city in the United States of America.

We are going to continue to invest in these communities. It's not about taking people out of these communities and moving them across town. It's about investing in these communities and providing mixed-income housing. It's about encouraging this educated generation to return or to continue to live in these communities. You need them to help others navigate through the educational institutions. They are the ones that are in a position to demand accountability.

It requires all hands on deck. It requires everyone leveraging their resources and making the necessary investments. It's not easy.

Is public/private partnership the key to driving real change and how important has it been for you to engage the business community and private sector in your efforts?

It's a critical component. The public sector cannot do it by itself. The public sector can be a catalyst. The public sector can signal to the rest of the community and the rest of the city.

Complete Communities is a very, very ambitious initiative. You can't include every community in this initiative at the same time. Otherwise, you deplete the resources you have. It requires a very concentrated approach. The downside with this is that the communities that are not listed want to be a part and, at this point, they're not.

For these five communities and the other five I named a few weeks ago, I am telling the private sector, the faith-based communities, nonprofits, developers, financial institutions, you name it, whatever resources that you have, we collectively all need to come together and leverage these resources.

The singular purpose is to transform communities and to have the greatest impact in the shortest amount of time. We're going to stay here until we see that transformation occurs because the goal is not to come in and drop

'X' amount of dollars and move on. It's about establishing stronger, resilient, sustainable communities. That's the goal.

Part of it is making the investment, but it also requires creating the leadership within these communities that can sustain what we have done as we move on to the next set of communities. We're not here to tell these communities what is best for them. We go in to work with the leadership in these communities and, if the leadership doesn't exist, we have to create it while working with people in the neighborhoods because they know what they need.

We don't want to change the character or the culture or the personality of these communities. We just want to help them make the community better. I tell people that we can't immediately reverse neglect that has occurred over decades, but we can demonstrate to people in these communities that we see them and that we are investing in their communities. We are working with you. We want to work with you.

This also enhances public safety at the same time. It's important that these communities that have been ignored for a long time see us coming in early before some flashpoint such as a shooting occurs. If we are already engaged in these communities before such an incident occurs, then it will help that we have already established good faith and credibility.

We can't rely on police alone for public safety. We have to work to provide the employment and business opportunities and quality growth. We have to improve the neighborhood schools. They need to see that we're providing parks and green space that are equal to the parks that you would put elsewhere in the city. When they see these things taking place in their neighborhood, it changes things for the better. I believe it makes the community safer and the city safer.

Are you able to take moments to reflect and celebrate the wins?

We celebrate them every day. The greatest thrill is being a part of making something happen and it may not always be the big project. If somebody has been living next to a lot that has been overgrown and they call in and we're able to arrange to cut that weeded lot, for them, that's a win and, for us, it's something to celebrate. ●