



sandra gunn | annise parker

The City of Houston's Green Initiatives are literally sprouting up all over the place! From the City Hall Victory Garden at Tranquility Park where Mayor Annise Parker tends to Swiss chard, tomatoes, kale and cabbages to the first of 65 Electric Vehicle (EV) charging stations on Walker Street at City Hall.

I met with Mayor Parker and Laura Spanjian, Sustainability Director for the City of Houston, to get the good news that Houston is a Green Leader on par or beyond Chicago, LA and New York.

Where did you begin?

Published in 2010, the City of Houston conducted a baseline community multi-pollutant emissions inventory using 2007 data gathered from CenterPoint Energy and several public agencies, including the City of Houston, Houston-Galveston Area Council, the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality and the EPA. The results of this inventory indicated that residential, commercial and industrial building energy use produced more than half of the City's greenhouse gas (GHG) and criteria air pollutant emissions, and transportation emissions made up over a third of GHG emissions.

How did you respond?

In efforts to reduce greenhouse gas and criteria air pollutant emissions resulting from the City's building and transportation operations, as well as save taxpayer money, the City of Houston created the Municipal Emissions Reduction Plan. The plan was the first comprehensive, coordinated approach at greening city operations, particularly in the building and transportation sectors.

Through the City's Municipal Plan, more than 1.5 million tons of GHG emissions have been avoided and more than 20 major projects have launched in the last few years. Everything from smarter traffic lights and buildings to cutting-edge energy efficiency programs and commitments to buy hybrid, and soon electric, vehicles for the fleet - are all contributing to making the City of Houston a role model for green government and responsible stewardship. Houston now has the 3rd largest hybrid fleet in the US. EPA has ranked Houston as the #1 municipal purchaser of renewable energy (wind) in the US. And we are ranked #4 overall in the nation.

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I care about the environment, I want to make the world a better place for the next generation...but as a native Houstonian and Realtor in this sprawling metropolis, mass transit is never going to work for me. Laura said that you saw that coming and if we won't or can't give up our cars, then you are making electric cars a viable option. How?

Houston is one of the first launch cities for electric cars, and will be incorporating 30 Nissan Leafs into our fleet in 2011. We are also leading other cities with 24-hour EV permitting, incentives for charging stations, robust charging station infra-

structure throughout Houston with a public-private partnership with NRG, who is the first energy provider in the US to provide EV charging packages and invest in infrastructure. Houston is their first launch city.

As far as your Local Food Promotion initiative, do you have a garden?

I do! I have a herb garden at home and I compost - though I am not as good about turning it as I should be! Eat Local is important to me not only because it reduces truck transportation emissions but also provides savings and health benefits to Houstonians. A triple win. With the help of Mark Bowen from Urban Harvest and Chef Monica Pope, we have recently boosted the local economy by starting the City Hall Farmers Market on Wednesdays: 40 vendors (micro-businesses) as well as a few of the popular food trucks now have new opportunities every week. Also, the vegetable Victory Garden at Tranquility Park which was designed by Suzy Fischer of Fischer Schalles. It has brought together staff and created community and is an amazing education tool.

And to kickstart 2011...

We will be launching a first-ever Commercial Building Energy Efficiency incentive program, which will provide funding for 20 percent of an energy efficiency project. This works alongside our recently launched Green Office Challenge: my goal is to be #1 in the country for number of LEED Certified and Energy Star Rated buildings (we are currently #8 and #6 in US, respectively). For Energy Star, we are currently #2 in US based on square footage.

We are on the precipice of becoming one of the greenest cities in the country. That may surprise many outside of Houston, but when we set our minds to something, we can achieve anything.

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