



## Austin's Climate Leadership: White Paper

by Will Wynn

Former Mayor of the City of Austin

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*The Rethink White Papers offer up fresh, innovative thinking to Austin citizens and decision-makers about the future of our City. They are intended to present some of the best sustainability thinking from Austin's thought-leaders in a way that is fresh, accessible and compelling. We hope the Rethink White Papers will inspire us all to take action for a bright green future for Austin.*

**Find the entire series at:**

<http://austintexas.gov/department/rethink-austin-white-papers>



The mission of the Office of Sustainability is to provide leadership, influence positive action through engagement, and create measurable benefits for Austin related to climate, food, resource efficiency, and resiliency.



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Ten years ago today, on February 15, 2007, the Austin City Council unanimously approved the Austin Climate Protection Plan, which staff and I had spent several months crafting. The Austin Climate Protection Plan was an all-encompassing strategic plan that, if committed to successfully, would help make Austin the leading city in the nation in the effort to reduce and reverse the negative impacts of global warming.

I was – and continue to be – of the opinion that Austin was/is an indispensable city in this fight. Among other things, Austin:

- 1) was the capital city of the most polluting (from a carbon-emissions standpoint) state in the most polluting country on the planet;
- 2) owns our own electric utility, knowing that dirty electricity generation is the single largest part of this problem;
- 3) had to deliver electricity to the fastest growing metro economy in the country;
- 4) was a significant technology hub and innovation would be a big part of the solution; and
- 5) had a citizenry that recognizes the problem and demands that we do something about it.

And I knew that there was no leadership, or even help, coming out of Washington.

The Austin Climate Protection Plan was originally comprised of five broad parts:

*Municipal Operations* – using its own diverse operations and facilities, the City of Austin would lead by example.

*Austin Energy* – among other things, our utility would ramp up its conservation, efficiency, and renewables programs.

*Homes and Buildings Efficiency* – strengthening building codes would reduce energy consumption and utility bills.

*Community Buy-in* – continual outreach and educational programs.

*Going Carbon Neutral as a City* – develop products and resources that measure and aid the much larger community effort.

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I readily admitted at the time that a few of the individual goals embedded in each of the five segments were betting on future technological advances. And, in fact, plenty of new products and market dynamics are aiding this important work. But of the specific targets in the plan, here's where we stand after ten years on two key benchmarks:

- 2007: All city buildings and facilities were to be exclusively powered by 100% renewable energy by 2012.
- Today: This aggressive goal was fully achieved in 2012, reducing municipal greenhouse gas emissions by 75%!
  
- 2007: Austin Energy would meet 30% of all energy needs through renewable energy by 2020, including 100 megawatts of solar.
- Today: Austin Energy surpassed that 30% threshold in 2016, now standing at 31% including 180 megawatts of solar.

But the stat that ultimately defines the success of any climate protection strategy is measuring reductions (hopefully) in greenhouse gas emissions. From the City of Austin's 2007 baseline – which was already better than most U.S. cities – per capita greenhouse gas emissions are now down 9%. But we have to do better, as our population growth more than offsets those improvements.

So if you're late to this game, don't worry. There's still plenty more to do and lots of ways to help. Water conservation, solid waste recycling, more efficient/alternative transportation, consumer choices, etc. And the City has resources to help.

A fundamental part of the Austin Climate Protection Plan was the creation of the Office of Sustainability in 2010. Today the Office tracks municipal and community performance on key climate-related metrics. And seeking ways to inspire Austinites to take personal action to reduce their carbon footprint, they offer educational outreach to engage the community in making sustainability a priority every day – at home, at work, and all around town. Check out [www.austintexas.gov/climate](http://www.austintexas.gov/climate).

Just like back in 2007, don't expect any help from our federal government related to climate change. Luckily, local communities in all parts of this country and all over the world continue to take action to reduce the impact that they are having on our planet's future. Collectively we are making a difference. And I am proud of the leadership role that Austin continues to play.

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*Prior to elected office, **Will Wynn** had a successful 20-year career in the commercial real estate development industry with projects in Chicago, Dallas, Houston and Austin. In 2006 he was named a Distinguished Alumni of Texas A&M's College of Architecture.*

*Wynn served on the Austin City Council 2000-03 and as two-term Austin Mayor 2003-09. An early Chairman of the Downtown Austin Alliance, he has long been a leading advocate for transforming downtown into the most vibrant urban core in the country.*

*He lectures, advises and consults with governments, utilities and private entities on topics ranging from sustainability and economic development to creative cities and urban revitalization. His sustainability work has won him awards from a diverse group of organizations, including Scenic Austin, The U.S. Conference of Mayors, The Colorado River Foundation, The Alliance to Save Energy, The Hill Country Conservancy and the Association of Energy Engineers, among others.*

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