



Make Austin Wealthy: White Paper

By Carey W. King

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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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Keep Austin Weird. The mantra is everywhere – on shirts, coffee mugs, and bumper stickers.

And yet Austin seems to be losing its weirdness. Downtown music venues are struggling. Leslie (the scantily clad, homeless, former mayoral candidate) has passed. Perhaps the most clear sign of losing our weirdness is that Austin hosts a Formula 1 race – a combination of glamour and technology that leaves no trace of “weird” in its tracks. Such are the challenges of a growing city.

Some weirdness remains. Early mornings at Barton Springs pool. Austin is the largest city that doesn't host a major league sports team (take that Portland ... we can put a salamander on it!). We still have vibrant movie rental stores. Austinites recently voted against letting transportation network companies dictate the regulations that govern our city. In the past we have also voted down other transportation options that appear on city ballots (if we are doing this to make traffic so bad people start leaving, I haven't seen the memo).

I'm thinking about a new mantra:

Make Austin Wealthy – and by “Wealthy”, I mean emphasizing all kinds of assets, and by “Austin” I mean every citizen and neighborhood of Austin.

Most of the time when we think about “wealth” we think of how much money, or financial capital, we have. We also usually consider how many assets we own either individually (home, car, etc.) or collectively (buildings, roads, water and energy system, etc.). This is built or physical capital.

But there are other forms of capital that we need to consider to ensure a vibrant community, economy, or city:

- Natural capital: This is the water, land, trees, animals, clean air and other natural resources that surround us. Examples are Town Lake, Zilker Park, the bats under the Congress Avenue Bridge, and the trees on the Capitol grounds that make it a nice place for picnics.

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- Political capital: This is about access to structures of power and the ability to influence rules that shape the distribution of resources. Changing to district-based representation on the City Council was aimed to increase political capital in poorer parts of the city.
- Human capital: Austin has this in spades – the sum total of knowledge and skills acquired through educational channels. Among our universities, tech community, vibrant food and music scenes, and other businesses and non-profit organizations is a tremendous amount of human capital.
- Cultural capital: These are the cultural understandings and practices that shape how we grasp the world. This is what Keep Austin Weird was partly about, buying local to maintain local character.

In principle, each citizen should have access to a sufficient amount of each of these forms of capital, above some minimum deemed enough (by the citizens of Austin) for a basic livelihood. The key unknowns are “access” (the ability to benefit from each type of wealth) and “sufficiency” (an adequate supply of each type wealth).

We know that time equals money. In terms of measuring the accessibility and sufficiency of various forms of wealth, both time and money are good metrics to use.

For example, many of us allocate, or budget, our income to meet various necessary and discretionary purposes. However, one also has to do a good job at budgeting time. Ancient cities were usually limited (e.g., by the city wall) to approximately 1.5 miles in radius (3 miles across). This size restriction ensured that each citizen, walking at average speed of 3 miles/hour, could have daily round-trip access to anywhere in the city in 60 minutes. Not coincidentally, driving commute times within modern cities should also be limited to less than 60-90 minutes. There is only so much travel time one can tolerate in a day.

It might be the case that in principle a person has access to public parks, lakes, and greenspaces, but in practice that person does not have enough time to visit them. Thus, a restriction in time prevents sufficiency of access. This restriction in time could be due to working more than 50 hours/week or 10 hours/day on a regular basis, or it may be that the person may not live in close proximity to a green space so that it would require a lot of time to access those areas.

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The same restrictions from income and time constraints can affect sufficient access to basic needs such as food, water, and energy access. [23% of Texas households spend more than 8% of their income on household energy](#), which indicates limited access to other important resources. Thus, electric utilities such as our own Austin Energy, have programs to support low income households.

Time and income constraints can also restrict access to food. Our [City Council understands this](#) as it recently adopted a resolution on the matter. If it takes too much income or time to access a grocery store that has fresh fruits and vegetables, then this can be a significant deterrent to buying and eating healthy food. This can lead to eating more accessible, but less nutritious fast food items that degrade the personal health (human capital) of that person, and [ultimately the city, via declines in health](#) and increasing long-term medical costs. If you have a car, there is generally no problem getting to a grocery store. A [UT-Austin School of Architecture study](#) shows that over 96% of low income areas (having > 20% of population below the poverty line) can drive to a grocery within 10 minutes. Only about 20% of those areas can walk to locations with healthy food in 10 minutes, and about 80% can bike to them.

By supporting alternative transportation, Austinites help to support increased levels of local and personal wealth. Studies have shown that streets that encourage pedestrian activity also increase business activity. More people on bikes keeps dollars in the local economy, save money compared to the costs of driving, and contribute to more local jobs than roadways do.

Questions we can ask ourselves to determine what it takes to Make All of Austin Wealthy:

1. What is the minimum amount of time and maximum cost associated with each citizen of Austin being able to experience enough wealth from all forms of capital?
2. What percentage of household income should each person have left over for discretionary expenses after paying for the basic needs of shelter, food, energy, and water?
3. Is the distribution of the various capitals, across each District "acceptable" as defined by the community? How unequal is too unequal for a modern, weird, and wealthy city?

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The past century was about unrestricted growth in a resource-abundant world. This century is about reorganizing an increasingly unequal society in an increasingly resource-scarce world to enhance cooperation. Austin's smart. Austin's still a little weird. Perhaps the weirdest thing we could do is to become the best city in the world at spreading the wealth. Let's increase the distribution of capital within our capital city. Keep Austin Weird by Making Austin Wealthy ... all of it.

Dr. Carey W. King performs interdisciplinary research related to how energy systems interact within the economy and environment as well as how our policy and social systems can make decisions and tradeoffs among these often competing factors. The past performance of our energy systems is no guarantee of future returns, yet we must understand the development of past energy systems. Carey's research goals center on rigorous interpretations of the past to determine the most probable future energy pathways.

Carey is Research Scientist at The University of Texas at Austin and Assistant Director at the Energy Institute. He also has appointments within the Jackson School of Geosciences and the McCombs School of Business.

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