

Houston Philosophical Society
Minutes of 626th Meeting, November 20th, 2008

CALL TO ORDER: 8:00 P.M.

President Robert Patten called to order the 625th meeting of the Society in its 88th year. After the introduction of guests, Dr. Patten introduced Chandler Davidson, Research Professor and Radoslav Tsanoff Professor of Public Policy Emeritus at Rice University, who introduced the speaker, City Controller Annise Parker. Controller Parker is a graduate of Rice University and spent twenty years with Mosbacher energy, as well as owning a bookstore for 10 years and still co-owning a bookkeeping and income tax company. Prior to her election as City Controller beginning in 2002, Ms. Parker served for six years as an at-large member of the Houston City Council. She was sworn in for a second term as Controller on January 2, 2006. She is Houston's 14th City Controller and its second-highest elected official and serves as the City's Chief Financial Officer. She also remains active in many civic affairs.

Controller Parker spoke about the problems of public servants, which she believes have not changed since the cave man, and the qualifications for public service, the primary one of which is the ability to deal with subjects about which you know nothing and that may have unintended consequences. For example, as Controller she has been called on to reconcile the interests of the owner of a "hot sheet" motel utilized by truckers who need a place to sleep for a few hours but also a possible source of blight with the interests of surrounding residents. She has also been called on to protect the interests of a gay restaurant owner from harassment by an abutting property owner who undertook an anonymous campaign against the restaurant, calling for repeated city inspections that turned up no or only slight infractions and placing private, and illegal, 'no parking' signs in front of his property. She was able to help by securing an ordinance limiting the number of city inspections and by ordering removal of the signs. Controller Parker is also proud of having obtained a pooper scooper ordinance for the City and of restricting the owning of exotic animals without being forced to include ferrets.

Controller Parker sees as problems the air quality outside our city limits, which the Mayor lacks jurisdiction to control, and the general health of the economy. The City has been booming for the last five years, but we are not immune to the economic problems besetting the country. So far we have been saved because our

economy stretches beyond our borders and we are a growth area. But to keep up with our growth we need to attend to our infrastructure, particularly our underground water and sewer lines.

Controller Parker would also like to see Houston greener. We need to replant and replace landscaping destroyed by Hurricane Ike. Houston does not have spectacular terrain or an ideal climate, but it is a place where we can be outside most of the year.

With respect to emergencies, we need to monitor our medical response, we need a new radar system to communicate better, and we need to coordinate with other safety entities. With regard to a possible terrorist attacks, while Houston is a second tier city, it is a prospective target of bombing because of its pipelines and chemical plants. Because our water system uses pumps, we have to protect against destruction and poisoning. In Ike the electrical system nearly failed and we discovered we had never modeled a complete electrical grid failure. Now the mayor and city counsel are engaged.

With regard to a proposed congressional stimulus package for the economy, Houston has economic concentrations in energy, the Port of Houston, the Medical Center, NASA and aerospace. The new administration needs to continue to fund NASA. We also need to improve access to domestic energy sources. Controller Parker would like to see us become the alternative energy capital in addition to the traditional energy capital. We do not need a bailout. If oil prices come back up the City of Houston will be happy. The banks are relatively healthy, and the Washington Mutual transition to Chase is going well. We will, however, compete for funds as needed, including investment for the transit corridor up Highway 59 from Mexico to the Canadian Border.

The expense to the City of the cleanup from Hurricane Ike was \$250 million. We have an evergreen contract, however, for \$98 million for emergency debris cleanup and we should get \$200 million back, including FEMA funds. We also have a \$25 million rainy day fund, which we need to increase to \$50 million. We may not reach our \$250 million target, but it could have been much worse. The crews that came to Houston did a phenomenal job.

ADJOURNMENT: 9:00 p.m.