

# Potholes, Pensions, and Politics

*Houston's new, homegrown mayor promises a “transformative” tenure.*

by MICHAEL HARDY

**I**N JANUARY, the newly elected mayor of Houston, Sylvester Turner, J.D. '80, donned work gloves and safety goggles, picked up a shovel, and spread hot, smoking asphalt over a gaping pothole on Neuens Road in West Houston. As news reporters watched, the small-framed, powerfully built 61-year-old announced that this was the 936th cavity plugged since he took office.

In a city facing budget deficits, \$5.6 billion in total pension liabilities, and plunging oil prices that are gutting the local energy-driven economy, potholes might seem like a low priority. But drivers who endure the notoriously cratered streets have welcomed Turner's focus on road repair; roughly 10,500 potholes were filled in January and February—nearly all of them, as he had promised in his inaugural speech, within one business day of being reported.

“The campaigning is over, and now it's time to govern,” Turner said during a recent interview at City Hall. Filling potholes is his way of showing residents historically skeptical of government that he can actually improve their lives. And Turner will need at least that burgeoning trust to accomplish his more pressing goals: stabilizing municipal finances, hiring a new permanent police chief and enlarging the force, and redirecting transportation funding from ever-wider freeways toward mass transit. Developing regional public transportation—an issue long promoted by other elected officials and environmental activists—has significant public support. Adding suburban highway capacity, he told the Texas Transportation Commission in an unusually strong speech in February, is “not creating the kind of vibrant, economically strong cities that we all desire.”

Turner has also called for “shared sacrifices.” That means, he says, “Everyone needs to participate in the financial stability and viability of the city. The sacrifice is not necessarily the same for everybody. As we say in my church, ‘It's not equality of giving, it's equality of sacrifice.’ Some can give more because it won't hurt them as much.” Turner, a career trial lawyer and former state legislator, plans to be “a transformative mayor in these challenging times—and you can't be transformative by being an incrementalist,” he adds. “Either you go bold, or you go home.”

IN TRUTH, Turner has always been home. Born and raised in Houston, the centrist Democrat spent 26 years in the Texas legislature, most of them on the appropriations committee, where he earned a reputation as a pragmatic coalition-builder. Yet he has

long sought the mayoral office: after two failed attempts in 1991 and 2003, he won last December's runoff election over Republican businessman Bill King by just under 4,100 votes.

Houston is one of the most diverse U.S. cities, demographically divided almost evenly among whites, blacks, and Latinos, with foreign-born residents comprising almost 30 percent of the population. Turner, the city's second African-American mayor, was elected largely because he won 93 percent of the majority-black precincts. (King, who is white, won 71 percent of majority-white precincts, but Turner also won the Hispanic vote.) Turner insists those numbers are “only relevant to analyzing what took place in 2015. My term started on



Sylvester Turner

January 2, 2016, and my challenge and responsibility are to represent all the city of Houston, not just those who voted for me. I've worked with Republicans, Democrats, conservatives, liberals, however you want to define it. I don't see the distinctions."

Turner grew up in Acres Homes, a semi-rural African-American neighborhood in northwest Houston, where he still lives. "I didn't realize I was poor," he notes, "until people told me I was. My parents always found a way to make sure there was food on the table. I had a roof over my head. I had clothes." He shared a single bedroom with his eight brothers and sisters. His father, a handyman, died when Turner was 13, leaving his mother to support the family on her salary as a maid at a downtown hotel.

In seventh grade, he was in the first group of black students bused 18 miles away, under a court order, to an all-white school. He recalls "a lot of fights. You have to picture, here come these buses with these black kids pulling up to the school. The doors come open, and we were walking as a group, going into a school that was 100 percent white. We're looking at them, and they're looking at us, for the first time." The students on both sides were just "responding to what adults were putting in their ears," he adds. "I tell everyone, if you leave kids to themselves, they find a way of getting along. After two or three years, things started to level out and improve."

He remembers listening closely to Texas congressman William Reynolds Archer Jr., who visited the school and talked about the "role of government and the importance of participating in politics," Turner says now: "I was impressed, even though he was a Republican." By the time Turner graduated as valedictorian, he had been elected president of the student council and "Mr. Klein High School," and had been the school's debate champion for four years. Among his heroes were Martin Luther King Jr. and John F. Kennedy; he recited their speeches over and over again at home, practicing his delivery. "I would pull out JFK's speeches and get in front of the mirror and do my thing," he says with a laugh.

At the University of Houston he studied political science and was the only African American on the school's debate team. He applied to law school despite not knowing a single lawyer (nearly everything he knew about the profession came from television shows like *Perry Mason*), and was bound for

the University of Texas at Austin until two of his professors took him to lunch and urged him to reconsider Harvard, where he had also been accepted. "For any student, it would be a tremendous plus to go to Harvard," one of them told Turner, "but especially for an African American." Turn-

**"I didn't realize I was poor," Turner says, "until people told me I was."**

er did some research, talked to his mother and friends on the debate team, and then, despite never having lived outside Houston, headed to New England.

In 1977 he landed at Logan Airport with all his belongings in a single footlocker. He soon met a fellow African-American first-year from Wyoming, and the two rented an apartment in Central Square. "Both of us came from relatively poor families, so we went to the Salvation Army" thrift shop to buy furniture, and carried it home through the city streets, Turner reports. "It was only when we went to pick up the television, that the cops stopped us," he adds. "Somebody saw two black guys carrying furniture and had called the police." The young men had to produce their Harvard IDs before the police let them go.

THAT INCIDENT, and struggles to fit in among wealthier, more cosmopolitan classmates, stand out, Turner says of his experiences while at Harvard, which he terms "a different world for me." Because those around him had money to go out to lunch at restaurants, he went to see a financial-aid officer, "and I'll never forget what she said: 'At Harvard, we want everyone to have a meaningful experience. We don't want anyone to feel any less than anyone else.'" She increased his stipend and had it deposited directly to his bank account. "After that, I started living large," he jokes. "To heck with trying to prepare these little sandwiches, 'Let's go to the restaurant and order off the menu!' I give her a lot of credit to this day because prior to that it was difficult. She helped put me on a level playing field."

He did well at Harvard; after graduation he had a corporate-litigation job waiting at one of Houston's top firms, Fulbright & Jaworski. Within a few years, though, eager for more independence, he and two other young African-American lawyers, Barry Barnes and Rosemarie Morse, J.D. '79,

founded their own firm. They sometimes represented corporations, like a local utility, Centerpoint Energy, but most of their clients were smaller, black-owned businesses. Creating a practice "was a huge risk," admits Barnes, a longtime friend who's continued running the firm since

Turner resigned to become mayor. "But at a young age sometimes you don't appreciate the risk. Sylvester was just starting a family and so was I, so there were people who relied on us." (Turner and his then-wife, Cheryl, divorced in 1991; they have a grown daughter, Ashley, who was active in her father's campaign.)

It helped, Barnes notes, that "Sylvester never gives up on anything. He's a litigator by nature, and a fighter." Being mayor, Barnes believes, was already in Turner's mind by 1984, when he first ran for office, for a seat as a Harris County commissioner. He lost that race, badly, to a local political heavyweight, El Franco Lee.

Four years later, however, he ran for the state legislative seat representing the district that included his Acres Homes neighborhood—and won. During his nearly three decades in that post, Turner became a leader of the Democratic delegation, and, from 2006 to 2016, served on the 10-member conference committee that writes the state budget.

During the 2005-2007 legislative season, Turner helped reverse devastating cuts to the Children's Health Insurance Program, a key part of the safety net in a state where one in five children are uninsured. "Even when the Republican speaker said Republicans wouldn't vote for it, at the end of the day, 64 Democrats and 62 Republicans voted for it," Turner says with obvious pride. His efforts secured medical coverage for some 130,000 Texas children. He also advocated consistently for better mental-health treatment. Two of his brothers face mental-health challenges, he says, and Texas has "always been near the bottom when it comes to mental-health care, and for poor families it's even harder to get access."

Over time, he became known as the "conscience of the House" for his passionate floor speeches defending the neediest Texans. "I came up in a household that



**Following two failed runs, the election-night victory was especially sweet for Turner.**

cation, since neither of my parents graduated from high school.”

Houston has been celebrated for its economic dynamism and racial diversity, but now the protracted collapse in the price of oil and a looming reversal in its overheated real-estate market will likely exacerbate the city’s financial problems. The police

force is considered understaffed, and faces controversies and lawsuits over questionable officer-involved shootings that have been detailed in *The Houston Chronicle* and *The Texas Ob-*

server. Meanwhile, Turner took office facing an estimated \$160-million budget gap that must be addressed by July, atop the city’s \$3.3 billion in general obligation debt that will come due in the next five years and a \$2.4 billion in unfunded pension liabilities, among the highest in the nation. (The total pension bill is \$5.6 billion, with retirement payroll contributions now consuming 20 percent of the city’s budget, according to *Texas Monthly*.)

But the main reason Houston can’t fix its streets or hire enough police officers to patrol them is that in 2004 its voters approved a draconian revenue cap that limits increases in property-tax collections to the combined rates of inflation and population growth, or 4.5 percent, whichever is lower. Last year the city took in too much money, so it was forced to cut tax rates to the lowest level since 1987. “We’ve got a cap that says, even when a growing city generates

was at the bottom of the economic ladder,” Turner says, “so I know what I’m talking about when I talk about income inequality. I know about the importance of edu-



**Lindsay Chase-Lansdale**



**Lee C. Cheng**



**Helena Buonanno Foulkes**



**Karen Falkenstein Green**



**Stephen Hsu**



**Ketanji Brown Jackson**



**John J. Moon**



**Ralph Nader**



**Alejandro Ramírez Magaña**



**Stuart Taylor Jr.**



**Ron Unz**



**Kent Walker**



**Damian Woetzel**

## Overseer and HAA Director Candidates

THIS SPRING, alumni can vote for five new Harvard Overseers and six new elected directors of the Harvard Alumni Association (HAA).

Ballots, mailed out by April 1, must be received back in Cambridge by noon on May 20 to be counted. Election results will be announced at the HAA’s annual meeting on May 26, on the afternoon of Commencement day. All holders of Harvard degrees, except Corporation members and officers of instruction and government, are entitled to vote for Overseer candidates. The election for HAA directors is open to all Harvard degree-holders.

Candidates for Overseer may also be nominated by petition if they obtain a prescribed number of signatures—201 this year—from eligible degree-holders (see page 26).

The names below are listed in the order they appear on the ballot.

The HAA’s nominating committee has proposed the following candidates for Overseer (six-year term):

Kent Walker ’83, Palo Alto. Senior vice presi-

dent and general counsel, Google Inc.

Ketanji Brown Jackson ’92, J.D. ’96, Washington, D.C. Judge, United States District Court.

Helena Buonanno Foulkes ’86, M.B.A. ’92, Providence, Rhode Island. President, CVS/pharmacy; executive vice president, CVS Health.

John J. Moon ’89, Ph.D. ’94, New York City. Managing director, Morgan Stanley.

Alejandro Ramírez Magaña ’94, M.B.A. ’01, Mexico City. CEO, Cinépolis.

Damian Woetzel, M.P.A. ’07, Roxbury, Connecticut. Artistic director, Vail International Dance Festival; director, Aspen Institute Arts Program, DEMO (Kennedy Center), and independent projects.

Karen Falkenstein Green ’78, J.D. ’81, ALI ’15, Boston. Senior partner, Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr, LLP.

Lindsay Chase-Lansdale ’74, Evanston, Illinois. Associate provost for faculty and Frances Willard professor of human development and social policy, Northwestern University.

The following candidates for Overseer were nominated by petition:

Ralph Nader, LL.B. ’58, of Washington, D.C. Citizen-activist and author; founder, The Center for Responsive Law and Public Citizen.

Stephen Hsu, of Okemos, Michigan. Professor of theoretical physics and vice presi-



a certain amount of revenue, we can't take advantage of it," says the mayor, clearly frustrated. In March, citing that cap, the city's high fixed costs and unfunded pension liabilities, and low oil prices, Moody's Investor Services downgraded Houston's general obligation limited tax rating to Aa3 from Aa2.

Turner ran a diligent, if anodyne, campaign, during which his opponent accused him of not having the stomach to implement reforms to fix Houston's financial crises. But he has moved surprisingly fast since moving into City Hall. He has already announced layoffs and across-the-board budget cuts for city departments and city councilmembers' discretionary funds; the only sector spared was the police force. He is also developing a 10-year fiscal plan that is likely to take on the "self-imposed" revenue cap, a divisive issue among voters. "I think you win people

over by showing them that there is new management, and that government can work for them," he asserts. "That it's responsive to *their* needs—not to my needs."

An optimist as well as a fighter, Turner takes a long, somewhat personal view. "I've lived through hard financial times, and the city's facing financial challenges right now. We are going to engage in shared sacrifice, and we will work through it." Once the crises are resolved, infrastructure can be developed to sustain the population growth, he says. "Quite frankly, I don't think there's another city in the country that's in a better position than we are." He pauses, leaning forward in his chair, a slight grin on his face. "And we're going to keep fixing the potholes."

*Michael Hardy is a freelance journalist based in Houston.*

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dent for research and graduate studies.

**Ron Unz '83**, of Palo Alto. Software developer and chairman, UNZ.org; publisher, The Unz Review.

**Stuart Taylor Jr., J.D. '77**, of Washington, D.C. Author, journalist, lawyer; nonresident senior fellow, Brookings Institute.

**Lee C. Cheng '93**, of Santa Ana, California. Chief legal officer, Newegg, Inc.

The HAA nominating committee has proposed the following candidates for Elected Director (three-year term):

**David Battat '91**, New York City. President and CEO, Atrion Corporation.

**Farai N. Chideya '90**, New York City. Distinguished writer in residence, Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute, New York University.

**Rye Barcott**, M.B.A.-M.P.A.'09, Charlotte, North Carolina. Managing partner and co-founder, Double Time Capital.

**Susan M. Cheng**, M.P.P.'04, Ed.L.D.'13, Washington, D.C. Senior associate dean for diversity and inclusion, Georgetown University School of Medicine.

**Victor Jih, J.D. '96**, Los Angeles. Litigation partner, Irell and Manella LLP.

**Eliana Murillo '10**, San Francisco. Head of multicultural marketing, Google Inc.

**Trey Grayson '94**, Fort Mitchell, Kentucky. President and CEO, Northern Kentucky Chamber of Commerce.

**Janet Nezhad Band '83**, M.B.A. '89, J.D. '90, New York City. Development consultant to nonprofit organizations.

**Michael C. Payne '77**, M.D. '81, M.P.H. '82, Cambridge. Attending physician, department of internal medicine, division of gastroenterology, Cambridge Health Alliance.



**Janet Nezhad Band**



**Rye Barcott**



**David Battat**



**Susan M. Cheng**



**Farai N. Chideya**



**Trey Grayson**



**Victor Jih**



**Eliana Murillo**



**Michael C. Payne**