



# CITY OF HOUSTON

**Sylvester Turner**

Mayor

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March 24, 2021

The Honorable Brian Birdwell  
Chairman, Senate Natural Resources & Economic Development Committee  
Texas Senate  
P.O. Box 12068  
Austin, Texas 78711-2068

Dear Chairman Birdwell,

Thank you for the opportunity to express my concerns regarding Senate Bill 1261, which would prohibit Texas cities from directly or indirectly regulating greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions that contribute to climate change.

It surprises many to see the mayor of Houston, Texas – a city built on the success of the oil and gas industry – take up the cause of climate change. Cities bear the financial burden of responding to disasters and protecting our most vulnerable. We are the boots on the ground and the boats in the water. As mayor of the 4<sup>th</sup> largest city in the country, my primary responsibility is to protect public safety, and this means taking meaningful action on climate.

Houstonians are all too familiar with the effects of climate change. Before Winter Storm Uri, we had five “500-year” floods in five years, including Hurricane Harvey – the largest rain event in North American history. Hurricane Harvey was larger, slower, and it brought forty percent more rain than it would have if it had occurred 100 years ago. In August 2020, Dr. Katharine Hayhoe released a study showing that if we do nothing, by 2050 the hottest day of the year in Houston, on average, will be 106 degrees, and we can expect 23 days a year over 100 degrees.

Like cities across Texas, Houston is adapting to climate change by raising buildings, increasing detention, and promoting green stormwater infrastructure. But simply adapting isn't enough. As home to much of the nation's energy sector, Houston has a moral obligation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and slow the devastating effects of climate change. Doing so will reduce the severity and frequency of future storms and heat waves and lessen their impact on the most vulnerable in our communities.

Following Harvey, we realized we needed a strategy, not only to help minimize the City of Houston's carbon footprint, but also to help save money, grow our economy, and improve our quality of life. We knew we had the ability to take on bold projects and show how the City of Houston can lead by example. That's why we created the Houston Climate Action Plan, a science-based, community-driven strategy to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and meet the Paris Agreement goal of carbon neutrality by 2050. Similarly, Dallas, San Antonio, and Austin have also released climate action plans within the last year with the same goals and intent.

What makes Houston's Climate Action Plan unique, is our ambition – as the Energy Capital of the World – to lead the global energy transition. As a life-long Houstonian, I am proud of our history and proud of the innovation, growth, and prosperity the energy industry brings to our community. But, as leaders of the energy industry, I believe it is our responsibility to continue this legacy and develop the innovative technologies and practices needed to decarbonize the entire energy sector, worldwide. If we are successful, if the companies based in Houston follow our lead and develop scalable, low-carbon solutions like carbon capture utilization and storage (CCUS), clean hydrogen, or capitalize on the incredible wind and solar potential we have in Texas, or develop a thriving circular economy – we have the potential to decarbonize Houston and cities across the planet.

Our business community has been incredibly supportive of our climate efforts. Shell and BP have formally partnered with the City of Houston to implement our climate and resilience efforts. We work with CenterPoint and NRG on a broad range of emissions-reduction efforts, including purchasing renewable energy and electrifying public and private fleet vehicles. Every day, companies based in Houston are making bigger, bolder commitments to decarbonize and achieve carbon neutrality, which is pretty powerful for a city built on hydrocarbons. Our climate action plan is not about moving Houston away from the energy industry, but it is about moving the energy industry forward. It is also about creating the energy jobs of the future.

Our Climate Action Plan calls for creating 50 new “Energy 2.0” companies in Houston by 2025. Thanks to Rice University's Carbon Hub and Renewable Energy Accelerator, the University of Houston's Carbon Management Program, the Ion's Smart and Resilient Cities Incubator, Houston Exponential and Greentown Labs Houston – we are well on our way to reach that goal.

And while we talk about leading an international energy transition, equity and environmental justice – speaking up for the most vulnerable – are at the heart of our climate efforts. Our Sunnyside Landfill Solar Project is another example of how cities can combat the climate crisis while creating jobs and addressing decades of environmental injustice. In the 1930s, the City of Houston built a 240-acre landfill in Sunnyside, one of the oldest African American communities in Houston. After 50 long years of struggle and contention, we are moving forward with a plan to redesign the landfill into the largest landfill solar project in the US. The project is expected to generate enough clean energy to power 5,000 homes and off-set 120 million pounds of carbon per year, but it will also bring an estimated \$70 million in private investment to the community, creating jobs and training opportunities in one of the fastest-growing job markets today.

SB 1261 would prevent all of Houston's progress toward building a more sustainable and resilient city prepared to lead a global energy transition. The simple fact of the matter is that climate change is real, it is impacting cities across Texas every day, and Texas cities have no choice but to act. We would welcome greater efforts from the state to partner with cities to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. However, SB 1261's intent to prohibit municipal action outright and instead yield all regulatory authority to TCEQ is irresponsible, especially when considering that TCEQ's Pollution Prevention Planning budget was cut by 70% from 2008 to 2018. There is no time for politics when the safety of our communities is at stake.

Thank you for consideration. Staff from the City of Houston's Office of Sustainability is available should you have any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sylvester Turner". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "S" and a long, sweeping underline.

Sylvester Turner  
Mayor