

Interviewee: White, Bill

Interview Date: September 9, 2006

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Interview with: Mayor Bill White

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CC: This is Carla Curtis doing an interview with Mayor Bill White, the mayor of the city of Houston, Texas. Mayor White, the people that I have interviewed in this project all refer to you as the environmental mayor. So, you are quite well-known for this. When did you first become concerned about the link between air pollution and health hazards in Houston? Prior to being mayor?

BW: Yes. Just as a citizen, of course, you would hear the anecdotes about people who had moved here and they had some respiratory conditions. There was a problem. And then, I began doing research on some of the substances that may damage respiration around some time in early 2001 when I decided to spend a little bit of time on health-related projects including cleaning the environment here in Houston. I was familiar with the issues involving low level ozone from my involvement on the board of Environmental Defense here in Texas and then became more active and more vocal with an umbrella business organization, the Greater Houston Partnership, about the need for the business community to be an advocate for cleaner air.

CC: Did you have any specifics in mind when you formulated the task force on the air pollution?

BW: Yes. I wanted scientists to give us some health-based priorities for cleaning our air and the studies that I was familiar with before becoming mayor as chairman of the environment committee of the Greater Houston Partnership, there weren't many of them

Interviewee: White, Bill**Interview Date: September 9, 2006**

and they were pure viewed studies that take a decade to do and we didn't have a decade to do new studies. So, I believe based on the literature that existed with other populations concerning the known effect of various chemicals in our air as well as the analysis that we had through our monitors that showed the substances in our air that we ought to be able to come up with some enforcement priorities that were science-based.

CC: I know they had identified a number of top toxins in the area – benzene, butadiene, _____. What do you think, if anything, can be done to lower these toxins or is this an ongoing project?

BW: Well, it is ongoing but there can be significant reduction in the hydrocarbons in the olefin family- benzene, ethylene, butadiene would be examples of that- through the better operations of refineries and the refining and petrochemical complexes. There are some of these that are emitted from vehicles, both heavy construction vehicles, trucks, locomotives, some cars, but there could be significant reductions from the refining and petrochemical complex.

CC: Did the County formulate a task group to go along with yours?

BW: Most folks in the city, the vast majority of folks in the city, all but a few were in Harris County and so, you know, our scientists really work across city and county lines. Whether you ask somebody who works for the City or for the County, they would recognize the authority of these scientists.

CC: I do recognize that a lot of the standards are done by the state, at the state level. So, what role can the City actually do versus the State?

BW: Well, there are doctrines at law concerning nuisances which are the same sort of legal doctrines that prevent you from throwing hydrochloric acid on your neighbor's

Interviewee: White, Bill**Interview Date: September 9, 2006**

garden. It is called a nuisance. We can enforce those. In addition, we comprise and have had some success in working with the state regulators for prioritizing their own enforcement actions on the basis of actions that the City has undertaken. Recently, there was the biggest fine they have levied for failure to comply with environmental laws. So, you know, we are a significant part of the state of Texas in this metropolitan area and I think that they have sought and some welcome our input.

CC: It has been reported that you have already managed to cut emissions of butadiene by 50%. Was this negotiation, cooperation of industry?

BW: Yes, we had one facility that was one of our oldest facilities on the Ship Channel – changed hands a couple of times, gone insolvent, bankrupt – that accounted for a significant portion of butadiene emissions. And when we took aggressive action with that firm and I made it clear we would shut them down if they would not commit to a schedule for cutting their butadiene emissions, then they became far more cooperative and have a time table for reduction of emissions which is significant, and I think it also sent a pretty clear signal, well, I know it sent a pretty clear signal to some of the other industries for whom butadiene would be part of the production process.

CC: What do you think the general population can do to help curb the pollution?

BW: Well, there are two to three actions citizens can take. The first is to buy lower emission vehicles. Anybody who drives anything can be part of the solution, so I would encourage people to look for low emissions and good fuel economy vehicles when they make their choices on transportation. Anything that we do, literally, anything that you do to avoid waste and conserve energy does reduce the need for electrical power generation which are relatively clean plants in our area but do result in some air emissions. Then,

Interviewee: White, Bill

Interview Date: September 9, 2006

citizens can become informed votes or participants in the political process. There are some companies who believe, and I think they are sincere in their beliefs, that their bottom line and their employment is more important than some larger public interests. That is certainly more important to them. And they do speak up and try to avoid some of the accountability in the process so I think people should become informed voters so that it gives the elected officials and those that work with them the backbone to enforce environmental laws.

CC: _____

BW: Well, we will continue our health priority-based enforcement efforts. We reorganized our enforcement priorities within our air quality section of the health department _____ the number of inspections we make typically of water facilities and more on air facilities, more on the processes and parts of the plants that would be most likely to emit the air toxins. Second, we are working on a regional benzene reduction plant which would have some goals that we need to reduce our overall level of benzene levels that we would like to be able to apply down to the plant level and within those particular pipes within the plants that a lot of people are working on right now. We know we need to do it. It needs to be something that is adopted more or less as a region, but because most of the sources of benzene are outside the city limits, those are going to be some of our principal goals and objectives. We want to work for changes in standards for emission of air toxics that are used for _____ by the TCEQ so that those standards _____ emitted from the particular source and the standards incorporate assumptions concerning the other emissions _____.

Interviewee: White, Bill

Interview Date: September 9, 2006

that there were not other facilities that were emitting various levels of the air toxins in the area. That assumption is obviously wrong _____

CC: _____

BW: Personally, I don't think chemicals are the highest priority that we are going to use city funding for new medical _____. I am sure there are going to be medical _____ going on somewhere on planet earth with all the graduate students we had out there. Concerning exposure to air toxins, I would assume that the EPA will continue to fund studies on the air toxicity but my point is we know enough to know that these are not good chemicals. One great part of the study I thought was that it also identified those things that should be the lowest priorities for _____ and there are more chemicals _____ highest priority because I don't want to be just checking the boxes saying how many more inspections we have done. I want to say _____

CC: _____

BW: You bet. Somebody is going to be bored of all our discussions of hydrocarbon chains _____