ENVIRONMENT

Houston’s new smog fighter comes from surprising roots

By Matthew Tresaugue

Larry Soward is taking over Air Alliance Houston. "Texas will continue to be pro-economic development ... but there needs to be more balance," he says.

Soward became an environmentalist by chance, as he built a 35-year career at state agencies responsible for environmental quality.

Now, three years into his "retirement," the 63-year-old Soward is set to take the top job, at least temporarily, at Air Alliance Houston, a nonprofit organization seeking to end the city's stubborn smog problem.

He will succeed Matthew Tejada, who is leaving in March to take a post at the Environmental Protection Agency.

Beneath a wonkish exterior, Soward has turned into a passionate progressive on the issues of public health and quality of life, a stance that often put him at odds with Gov. Rick Perry while serving as one of the Republican's appointees on the Texas...
Soward promises activist approach to curbing smog

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Commission on Environmental Quality, TCEQ.

"We need to get past the mindset that we need this or that power plant no matter what," Soward said. "We need a more holistic approach."

He is poised to step into the role of activist after being grounded in bureaucratic work.

Fights over coal plants

After earning a law degree from the University of Texas in 1974, he applied at various state agencies and accepted his first job offer, which came from the Texas Water Commission, now part of TCEQ.

He later became the water agency's executive director and held top positions at the General Land Office and Public Utility Commission. In the 1990s, he was the deputy commissioner at the Texas Department of Agriculture when Perry was its elected leader.

As governor, Perry in 2003 appointed Soward to the three-member TCEQ. But they eventually split over Perry's push to build more coal-fired power plants, and Soward soon found himself on the losing end in a string of 2-to-1 votes.

Soward also frequently criticized the state agency for being too lenient on polluters and sided with EPA in its attempt to regulate carbon dioxide and other climate-altering gases under the Clean Air Act. Texas, among other states, has sued to block the rules.

Soward said he did not mind being a lonely voice of dissent because he saw it as "an opportunity to articulate a position that otherwise would not be part of the process. Texas will continue to be pro-economic development, which I'm not opposed to, but there needs to be more balance."

"Standing out at TCEQ"

Tracy Hester, who leads the environment and energy program at the University of Houston Law Center, said Soward brought the mentality of a lawyer to the role and had a mastery of detail.

"He stood out at TCEQ as a commissioner who was willing to state a position contrary to his colleagues," who also were Perry appointees, Hester said.

By 2009 when his term at TCEQ ended, Soward said he had no relationship with Perry, whose clashes with EPA over global warming and other issues became a centerpiece of his failed presidential campaign.

While many officials have left TCEQ for higher-paying work with companies they once regulated, Soward took another path. He agreed to help Air Alliance Houston propose key policy changes for TCEQ during its regular sunset review, which lets the Legislature consider the agency's performance and shape its goals for the next decade or so.

State lawmakers adopted a few of the suggested policy changes, including an increase in the amount TCEQ can fine polluters — $25,000 per violation per day, up from $10,000. Some environmentalists wanted more reforms, but Tejada considered the review a success.

"We were pragmatic," Tejada said. "We did not ask for the moon, and it was not a boilerplate environmentalist request. We made a few thoughtful policy suggestions."

Said Soward: "To make progress, you have to take incremental steps and compromise."

"Something special"

After Tejada asked Soward to stay involved, even on a part-time basis. That will grow into a full-time role as the interim executive director when Tejada leaves for his new EPA job.

Environmentalists and industry representatives said Tejada would be missed in part because of collaborative efforts. In time, Tejada brought credibility to a grass-roots group that had difficulty getting meetings with state officials, including Soward.

"They have built something special," said Hester, who is also vice chair of the energy and environmental policy group at the Greater Houston Partnership, the region's chamber of commerce. "Larry has big shoes to fill."

Need to expand?

Former colleagues at TCEQ said they are not sure Soward has the same ability to build coalitions, but Tejada said Soward gives the organization the "best likelihood that no balls get dropped."

Soward said last week he is not interested in the job permanently. The group's board expects to hire a new executive director in six months.

In the meantime, he said he would like the Air Alliance Houston to think about expanding its reach into other parts of the state.

"In terms of maturity, the organization is a late teen or a young adult," Soward said. "It has grown a lot but is not sure what it wants to grow up to become. Maybe I can help."

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