

# Matt Curtis

By Forrest Preece | West Austin News | West Side Stories

## Every town in the country needs a Matt Curtis. And if they don't have one, they need to find one.

I thought that it was about time I wrote a column on my friend Matt, a towering figure of civic involvement who did staff work in two mayoral regimes, was the public face for a major vacation rental company, and has founded an important policy group. As a reflection of his significant efforts, he was named "Austinite of the Year" by the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce in 2021.



For a long time, I've been wanting to talk to Matt about his background and his path to civic involvement. It turns out that indeed, his ancestry was hard-core in that regard. "Both of my grandfathers were active in politics. One was the president of the local coal miners' union, and the other was the president of a local political club."

Matt grew up in Round Rock when it was tiny. He gained a lot of inspiration for his later life because his mother was a degree planner in the Will C. Hogg building on the UT campus and she would bring him to work with her in the summers and other days. He attended the University of North

Texas where he won the 1993 Denton Citywide Karaoke Championship, and he crashed the Homecoming Parade with a float that read: "The Brass Key Club - You Know, for C Students." While Matt was roaming around UT, his attention was grabbed by the anti-Apartheid movement. From this ground, he learned of the fight against the evils of prejudicial policies and segregation and he became an active protestor, one of his first forays into politics. He talked with me about some of his experiences. For continuity's sake, I have divided the story into four parts.

### MAYOR WILL WYNN

Matt joined Mayor Will Wynn's staff starting in 2004; and he says that people forget so many of the things Wynn accomplished because he left public life so quickly after he held office. According to Matt, Wynn took the work championed by Major Kirk Watson to re-develop downtown and fought to make the best of every inch of our urban center.



One time, Matt wrote a speech for Wynn calling for 10,000 people to live downtown by 2020, and while delivering the speech to the Downtown Austin Alliance, Wynn changed the figure to 20,000. When he stepped off the podium, Matt asked in a panic, "Did you mess up?" "No," Wynn said. "I think we need to aim higher."

Wynn and his staff also championed causes that changed Austin, including condemning the Green Water Treatment Plant and beginning the process to redevelop that area into three new downtown blocks. They also fought to turn Cesar Chavez into a two-way street from its ridiculous configuration which had both one-way and two-way stretches. And they created and passed the Envision Central Texas bond initiative that contained worthwhile items, including the new Central Library.

These were some great achievements, but Matt says the event that changed him as a public servant and as a person was our city's response to Hurricane Katrina in Austin 2005. "I still get teary thinking about what so many people did. But Mayor Wynn was the hero of Austin's Hurricane Katrina Relief effort."

While they were in the early hours of the fateful day the hurricane was making landfall, Wynn's office was suddenly notified that planes from New Orleans would be landing in Austin that evening. Matt's only

choice was to load everything from his desk into a box and mark it “Later.” For the next thirty days, he and the mayor would practically live in the Convention Center.

During that time Wynn would insist that everyone should refer to our town’s visitors as “Our Honored Guests” and he would go on to hug each one of them and let them know the staff was there to help get them back to normality. In the aftermath, Austin’s response to Hurricane Katrina Relief effort was lauded on national news programs.

“I loved working with Mayor Wynn and years later he served as the best man in our wedding. He’s like an older brother...if your older brother helped to create the coolest city in the world,” Matt says.

## **MAYOR LEE LEFFINGWELL**

After spending three years at Capital Metro helping with significant expansion of transit service, Matt returned to City Hall to help his friend Lee Leffingwell, who he considers the most qualified elected official he has ever known. The global economy was collapsing in mid-2009 and he felt the need to help the city through that tough time. Leffingwell was elected as the environmental candidate, but almost overnight the pressing issue became the economy. There was no other choice. He had to switch gears and become focused on ensuring that Austinites had options for work while companies were falling apart. Leffingwell and his staff recruited new companies at a time many American cities were seeing massive job losses.

For instance, Facebook was looking at moving three hundred jobs to Austin and Mayor Leffingwell and Matt became directly engaged to help. After a location scout took the Facebook crew to look at sites, the mayor’s staff heard that they had not seen anything that interested them. “With a couple of hours before their

flight, the mayor and I hoped in my old Mercury Grand Marquis and drove them to various sites on their way to the airport,” Matt says. Facebook eventually chose Austin and grew their office here.

Mayor Leffingwell championed many things including significant transportation initiatives, a new water treatment plant (the only one that didn’t fail during the 2021 freeze) and the boardwalk completing the trail around Lady Bird Lake.

Besides putting immense energy into ground our economy during the Great Recession, Mayor Leffingwell also fought for one of Austin’s greatest assets. The 2006 bond of the Central Library was never meant to pay for the entire project, so Mayor Leffingwell and Matt had to battle for the gap in funding.

## **THE PRIVATE SECTOR**

Matt left City Hall with incredible enthusiasm to become the Head of Global Government Affairs at HomeAway, which was later bought by Expedia and rebranded as VRBO. He lost 250 pounds and became physically able to travel. During that time, it became clear that traditional vacation rentals, and the new concept of personal short-term rentals popularized by AirBnB, were about to face a tidal wave of regulations from local governments. His opportunity was to become the first expert on short-term rental regulations. “I was able to operate a network of communications and government experts working around the world to find an equitable solution for cities seeking compliance with local rules.”

That job helped Matt to find a new career and brought him to destinations around the world to meet with Great Britain’s Chancellor of the Exchequer, to testify before the European Parliament, and to work on policy solutions with leaders in global cities. This was as a time when the New Economy – sometimes called

with Sharing Economy or the Gig Economy – was really blowing up and Matt was often speaking alongside the teams from Uber, AirBnB or Task Rabbit. Oddly, he was the only person in these situations who came from local government, and just saying “Austin” captured attention everywhere.

## **SMART CITY POLICY GROUP**

Matt founded Smart City Policy Group in 2017 with the idea that he would get to work with friends and help bridge the divide between cities and the New Economy. Immediately their clients were the A-list of the new technologies and concepts that were coming to cities, such as autonomous cars, vacation rentals, and online job boards. This group had an attraction for private sector clients who wanted immediate connections with city leaders to help create solutions.

## **“Matt Curtis is the best friend of American mayors” - Mitch Landrieu**

On the other side of the equation, cities and other governments hired them to better understand these new industries and help with to develop effective policies. Almost every client they have wants to talk about Austin: either growing their own stake here or modeling the Capital City’s success.

Their group is constantly asked by governments and investments groups to analyze and recommend local guidelines for disruptive, changing industries. “When we launched we immediately had a team that included several former Austin policy makers including Mayor Leffingwell,” Matt says. But as they have grown, city executives from around the country have joined forces with them – such as former longtime Kansas City,





Missouri Assistant City Manager Rick Usher.

As their fifth anniversary approaches in 2022, Matt is proud to point to success stories such as:

- Launching eVTOL or Air Taxis with Florida cities. These flying cars will be delivering people to destinations in a couple of years and will soon be in cities around the country.

- Massive studies with governments and clients which show the economic, housing and cost of enforcement impacts of vacation rentals.

- The Smart City Policy Summit, which is a conference that brings together the policy makers and industry leaders looking to find solutions to these new economy issues. Their first in-person summit gathered a packed house in Austin of leaders from around the world

looking to find solutions for the short-term rental industry.

- The passage of a series of best practice resolutions by groups like the United States Conference of Mayors that highlighted the work in Fort Worth on creating city well-being initiatives.

- The work on the 2020 Prop A transportation bonds which will transform the Austin region.

- Creating "Covid Memorial Day" where they had over 150 cities pass local proclamations supporting the first Monday in March to honor the victims and heroes of the pandemic. Their work eventually spun into proposed Congressional and Senate Bills.

During this time, Mayor Mitch Landrieu from New Orleans said, "Matt Curtis is a best friend of American mayors" and Columbia,

South Carolina's Mayor Stephen Benjamin, who served as president of the United States Conference of Mayors, said "Matt Curtis is a valued resource for local leaders working on tough issues."

As Matt points out, policies and politics are as imperfect as is everyday life. He thinks Austin is a three-steps-up and one-step-back city. It advances further, faster than other cities. Historically, Austin has been successful because a reasonably-paced level of community engagement that takes full consideration of the facts before making decisions. "I was proud to work with Mayor Wynn and Mayor Leffingwell who both followed that practice," Matt says.

One last note from Matt: "An advisor and consistent support of Smart City Policy Group was former Austin Mayor Bruce Todd. We will miss him and his thoughtful guidance."