

NEWSMAKER:

An environmental 'dad' for Texas moves on

[Edward Klump](#) and [Mike Lee](#), E&E reporters

Published: Monday, October 24, 2016

AUSTIN, Texas — As he approached a simple wooden table to testify about ozone, Tom Smith didn't have to speak to draw the attention of one of Texas' leading conservative lawmakers

State Sen. Craig Estes (R) singled out Smith for his "tireless" work on the environment, and a round of applause ensued. The director of Public Citizen's Texas office, sporting his familiar white and gray beard, nodded. The "Smitty" retirement tour was underway.

"It's always nice to see you present," added state Sen. Eddie Lucio Jr. (D). "It gives our discussions a balance that obviously we need on every issue."

The bipartisan exchange at a committee meeting last month stands as a reminder that Smith carved out a powerful and unusual role in Texas politics that won't soon be matched ([E&ENews PM](#), Sept. 20). The 66-year-old managed to set a "left margin" on issues for years while retaining a pragmatism that kept him on good terms with power players like Estes.

Vintage Smitty was on display at that recent Senate [hearing](#), even if he wasn't wearing his trademark white hat during testimony. He used facts and figures to inform and, if possible, persuade. It isn't easy talking about the environment while representing a consumer group founded by Ralph Nader in a state where industry has enormous influence.



Tom "Smitty" Smith plans to retire as director of Public Citizen's Texas office after more than 30 years in that role. Photo by Edward Klump.

Smith, an Illinois native, can tick off some of his favorite Texas energy accomplishments, including an expansion of renewable power, battles against proposed coal plants and gains in energy efficiency. He recalls setbacks, too, including the state's move last year to limit cities' control of the oil and gas industry and hydraulic fracturing.

Smith is disappointed that money continues to play a big role in Texas politics while acknowledging that his personality helped his work over the years.

"But it's also being able to speak truth to power without offending the people you're talking to," he said recently from Public Citizen's office here.

Smith thinks his successor — not yet named — will be an upgrade, even if Texas' environmental community has a hard time seeing it. He's tired after 31 years in his job, and arthritis and a bad hip don't help. Another Texas legislative session starts in January, and Smith plans to help a successor become acclimated early next year before he exits.

"I'm getting the signals from my body that standing around at the Legislature is not going to be a pleasant part of my life in the future," he said.

Environmental 'choir'

Public Citizen's office near the state Capitol sums up what it's like to be an environmental advocate in Texas. The place comes with green bells and whistles, including solar and geothermal, and large windows. But the building leaks water.

"You can't always get what you want," Smith said, channeling the Rolling Stones, "but if you try sometime, you might get what you need."

Smith has looked over time to energy efficiency and renewables as antidotes to cyclical gas price spikes. He's raised concerns about the cost and safety of nuclear energy and waste. And Smith remains particularly worried about climate change, saying the effects are apparent in Texas, noting a 2011 drought.

Smitty is one of four "dads" of Austin's environmental community, according to Kate Zerrenner at the Environmental Defense Fund. The others, she said, are Ken Kramer, who used to direct the Lone Star Chapter of the Sierra Club; Jim Marston of EDF; and Myron Hess of the National Wildlife Federation.

Smith "has an incredible depth of institutional knowledge," Zerrenner said.

Different roles remain for Texas' green advocates, as EDF might work with industry and see a role for natural gas while voicing pollution concerns. Public Citizen, Smith said, tends to be "far more purist" on renewables and energy efficiency.

"My momma used to say, 'We all sing different parts in the same choir,'" he said. "And it's our hope that we all sing the same refrain."

Smith said he's gone up against industrial energy consumers that can seem more interested in near-term prices than long-term trends. He doesn't always agree with business groups but has worked with some on the Texas Emissions Reduction Plan (TERP) that uses incentives to lower emissions from equipment and vehicles.

Yet Smith remains concerned about large donors and pointed to a "lack of any environmental sensitivity" at the Railroad Commission of Texas, which regulates oil and gas wells.

Smith said the Statehouse has seemed more partisan the last eight years, and he decried the sway of conservative groups such as Empower Texans. He said some lawmakers are afraid to vote in the best interest of the state because they could face primary challenges.

Smith is hoping to see support for a Texas constitutional amendment that would require disclosures around money given to nonprofits that are essentially engaging in electoral activities.

Michael Quinn Sullivan, president of the Empower Texans nonprofit and treasurer of a political action committee, professed recently to be unfamiliar with Smith. Sullivan didn't doubt Smith's influence at the Texas Capitol, but he said passion isn't new and people should be able to advocate as loudly as possible.

It sounds like Smith wants "to let government intimidate citizens into silence," Sullivan said. "We take a different view."

A shifting grid

Steve Wolens, a former Democratic state lawmaker who was appointed to the Texas Ethics Commission, said Smith's work for better government has been noticeable. So has his style.

"He's unique with his hat, his seersucker coat, with his big satchel leather case that he throws over his shoulder," Wolens said.

Smith said he doesn't don seersucker these days, and he now uses a pack he can roll around. But his hat still makes appearances.

One of the biggest changes during Smith's tenure was the deregulation of Texas' main power market. It happened in phases after legislation passed in the 1990s.

Smith isn't a big fan of the competitive retail market because not everyone shops religiously for the best power price. But even with his opposition to that idea, he worked for emissions reductions at power plants, a renewable energy portfolio and strides in energy efficiency at the same time.

On the other hand, he said a deregulated wholesale market in Texas has seen more efficient natural gas units and an explosion of renewables. The American Wind Energy Association says Texas leads the country in installed wind capacity.

"Much of what we've accomplished would not have been possible in a regulated" industry, Smith said.

He also remains a fan of municipal electric utilities because they give people "a real opportunity to control their energy future." While some environmental efforts at the Capitol stalled in recent years, solar pushes have continued in Austin and San Antonio.

On a personal level, Smith has a plug-in electric hybrid car and solar panels at home, and he sees big changes ahead for the power sector.

"Within the next 15 years, the grid is going to be pretty much history," Smith said.

But he expects wires will be needed for large-scale transmission to move renewable energy from West Texas and some backup power will remain. He sees a shift from large central station power to microgrids, recalling the move toward mobile phones from landlines.

He said wind and expanded wires have played an important role in Texas, though technology may change future investment decisions. Texas' development of competitive renewable energy zones, known as the CREZ program, came with a roughly \$7 billion price tag as it expanded transmission infrastructure.

A looming frontier, as Smith sees it, includes homes with solar on the roof and storage embedded and financed as part of a mortgage. He sees a big role for geothermal systems, which have pumps to use ground temperatures to help heat and cool buildings.

Smith also gets excited thinking about moving freight without diesel by using automated vehicles powered by renewable energy.

"We're right at the cusp of beginning to develop some transportation alternatives that, if we take the leadership in, will once again enrich Texans," he said.

Looking 'down the road'

Smith expects changes in oil and gas, although he's not predicting the industry will be phased out in 15 years. He said it needs to happen now from a climate perspective, though technologically it may take 30 years. The politics are an open question.

In the meantime, Smith said there's a need to get emissions of methane — a major component of natural gas — under control by stopping leaks. One gas niche may involve using the fuel in small generators to balance renewables, though storage could affect that market going forward.

Smith continues to preach a message that may not sit well with everyone on the left: The perfect often can be the enemy of the good. He referenced the 2000 defeat of Al Gore by George W. Bush when Nader received some support for president.

"The purist approach that many in the left took to stick with Nader and devote with him got us into the Iraq War and is causing us to have the climate catastrophes that we're now seeing," Smith said.

He is looking to retire in February with a successor in place. Smith and his wife, Karen Hadden of the Sustainable Energy and Economic Development (SEED) Coalition, may travel and take on other projects.

He'll leave with admiration that stretches across the Texas political spectrum.

Shanna Igo, deputy executive director at the Texas Municipal League, said Smith has believed in his work given that "the average consumer can't come down to Austin and read all the bills."

Jake Dyer, a former reporter for the Fort Worth *Star-Telegram* who's now a policy analyst with the Texas Coalition for Affordable Power, said Smith's simple talk and likability allowed him to make points "without seeming overly threatening."

Sitting in an empty conference room at Public Citizen's office earlier this month, Smith admitted to questioning his decision to depart.

"But there will be somebody new and younger who will come along and will do a better job, who isn't worn out, and I'm ready to do something else," he said. "I've had my fun here, and it's time to find some other project, go over the next hill and see what's on down the road."

Estes, the Republican state senator who praised Smith last month, isn't expecting him to disappear.

"You may be retiring," Estes said, looking around the committee room, "but I'll be willing to bet that he'll be back to testify on his own."