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Whitmire is the mayor Houston needs

After 50 years in the Legislature, he's a proven leader guided by data and common sense — not ideology



Sharon Steinmann/Staff photographer

State Sen. John Whitmire earns the editorial board's recommendation for Houston mayor, based in part on his lengthy experience in government.

prison builder to bipartisan criminal justice reformer. Whitmire earned national recognition in the mid-2000s for teaming up with a Plano Republican to show that a "tough on crime" state could be "smart on crime" as well by closing prisons and, instead, expand diversion and treatment programs. He was later heralded for ending Texas' biased pick-a-pal grand jury system and protecting mentally ill inmates through the Sandra Bland Act. Today, Whitmire represents a majority Black and brown district and is the longest serving member in the Senate, earning him the honorary title of "dean." He's the only Democrat to chair a committee in the Republican-controlled chamber.

At turns charming and hard-nosed, Whitmire isn't the smiley backslapper who sets people at ease. He's hard charging at times, eerily quiet at others and can fire off a clever quip without breaking a squint. His humor can be wicked — and also revealing.

Congresswoman Sylvia Garcia, a fellow Democrat, has known Whitmire for about a half century since they were both young social workers in Houston. When they were senators together, they'd lament the woefully obtuse legislation that Republican leaders often aimed at immigrants — such as trying to kill the Texas Dream Act ensuring undocumented students in-state tuition — or the failure to fund schools and health care at levels that our young population needs to lead the Texas of tomorrow. It's a situation so short-sighted that if you don't laugh, you'll cry.

So, at some point, Garcia and Whitmire began sharing a bit of dark humor: "When y'all take over," Whitmire recalls telling Garcia, "y'all are going to be angry and want to get even. But when y'all line up all the Anglos in a firing squad, when you get to ol' Whitmire, I want you to speak up and say, 'No, let him water the horses because he was there for us when he didn't have to be.'"

Garcia still texts Whitmire that someday she'll let him water the horses. But first she's recommended him for mayor.

Garcia says Whitmire's support of her and other Latinas was unwavering — as was his support of adding a majority Hispanic district in the Senate, and of women's right to choose and trans-gender Texans' right to use bathrooms of their choice. After a mayoral-campaign ad criticized Whitmire for decades-old votes that showed a more conservative record on abortion, Garcia and state Sen. Carol Alvarado were quick to film a response ad.

"On the policy issues he's always been there, and it irritates me when I see the criticism that I think is unjust and undue," Garcia told us. She calls Whitmire "the man for the moment." He's uniquely qualified to address crime, she says, and after 50 years in the House and Senate, he's got the relationships with Republican leaders in Austin that could end some of the state government's feuds with Houston.

Whitmire insists he'd be committed to diversity, and the city's 22 department heads will reflect that. What he lacks in pep or pigment he makes up in connections and know-how: "You don't have my experience when you're 35. It's that simple. I've worked with nine mayors and seven governors," he says. "Experience matters."

While deploying his \$10 million war chest in the race was a controversial if legal move, no one can deny that he has built an impressive coalition of support including Democrats, Republicans, community groups, labor unions, law enforcement and people across Houston's vast rainbow of racial and ethnic diversity. And yes, some supporters such as Richard Weekley and Jim "Mattress Mack" McIngvale have given to Republicans and Tilman Fertitta, who donated \$100,000 to Trump's reelection bid, though all have given to Democrats. Whitmire says all they can expect in return is good governance.

Close your eyes for a moment and ask yourself: in this city of immigrants who start companies and win World Series, of silvery skyscrapers and moonshot cancer fighters, of astronauts who train for Mars, culinary stars and energy upstarts, of money that's fast and beats that are slow and surreal, what should the mayor of Houston look like? Or talk like? Or act like?

Of all the options, chances are, you didn't envision a 74-year-old white male career politician from Hillsboro who is partly funded by Republican megadonors and proposes to fight crime by enlisting the help of 200 Department of Public Safety troopers.

Chances are, you didn't envision John Whitmire.

With that description, it's easy to assume that he fits a mold, even the one in a TV attack ad lumping the Democratic state senator with Republicans, suggesting he's buddies with Gov. Greg Abbott and that he's the darling of the NRA — even though the organization gives his voting record an F.

Whitmire fits no mold. He has charted his own course, from his meteoric rise as a college dropout who at 23 won a newly created state House seat, to his evolution from Texas House class clown to Senate criminal justice chairman, to his transformation from

It's clear that Whitmire is well-prepared to do the unglamorous work of making this city function. After we considered the ideas, experience and campaign finances of 18 Houston mayoral candidates, only Whitmire, longtime Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee and businessman Gilbert Garcia made our short list.

Like Whitmire, Jackson Lee, 73, is a Houston mainstay. Also a Democrat, she served as an appointed municipal judge and was elected three times to Houston City Council before being elected to Congress in 1995.

She is a tireless advocate for her majority-Black district, and a champion of immigrant causes. She authored the Juneteenth National Independence Day Act and fought for the passage and recent reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act.

On the other hand, she has never been able to shake her reputation as an imperious, micromanaging boss and difficult colleague. No doubt, racism and sexism make her a favorite target of the political right, but it's hard to dismiss her persistently high staff turnover, misbehavior on airplanes and testimony from former staffers alleging abusive treatment.

She makes no apologies. "This is a tough business," she told the editorial board, "and, yes, women are treated differently for being tough, and I am tough. There is nothing that I ask my staff to do that has not been relevant to the people of this constituency."

Jackson Lee emphasizes her Washington connections, an advantage when the city is seeking billions in federal funds. She told us she wants to make Houston a tech city, a livable city. She will work to create jobs and ensure public safety, she said, while making sure that basic services meet Houstonians' needs.

We believe she has served Houston extraordinarily well, and endorsed her for reelection to Congress time and again. But she's not the bridge builder Houston needs now at City Hall.

At 60, Gilbert Garcia is a relative youngster. Engaging, with a neon exuberance in discussing everything from public pension portfolios to Broadway musicals, he has given generously to Democratic candidates but has never before run for elective office. A native of Corpus Christi and a Yale graduate, the first in his family to attend college, he touts his experience building Garcia Hamilton & Associates from managing \$200 million in assets to \$21 billion, as well as his stint as chair of Metro from 2010-2016 under former Mayor Annise Parker. By all accounts he pulled off a turnaround at Metro. Though he had no background in transit, he led what had been a troubled agency to triple the size of its rail system, redesign its local bus network and stabilize finances — all while insisting on transparency. He's a numbers man frustrated with Houston's dysfunction. Bad roads, bad garbage pickup, boil-water notices, he fumes: "You can go on and on." He'd act as a budget hawk while making the city work efficiently for all.

Garcia's optimism and ambition — he imagines Houston becoming a financial capital for Latin America — are refreshing. But as evidenced by his largely self-funded campaign, he hasn't built a coalition of community support. We fear a lack of political connections and savvy would frustrate his goals.

It will take a shrewd pragmatist — it always has — to successfully run this complex city, to balance its competing interests, priorities and profit motives. It will take a leader guided by data, strategic thinking and common sense — not unbending ideology — to address crime, shore up finances and get our trash picked up on time.

We believe that leader is John Whitmire. He is tough, but also seems to have the humility to avoid protracted fights, such as Houston's contract dispute with firefighters. He claims to have the good sense not to meddle in city contracts: as criminal justice chair, he says when somebody calls him to hawk a commode for the prison system, "I send them to the procurement office."

We expect him to continue that practice. And we'll be watching closely, given that as senator, he seems to walk a tightrope in trying to balance his personal business dealings and his public duties. As the Texas Tribune reported in 2013, "He has been known to represent — on legal retainer or as a consultant — government contractors, taxpayer-supported agencies and close friends who do business with public entities. For the past 15 years, Whitmire has also been 'of counsel' to the Houston-based legal giant Locke Lord, which has a long list of clients with interests before the Legislature, including some that have benefited from legislation he has sponsored or helped pass."

Whitmire insists he doesn't cross the line. Although some of his past dealings have raised eyebrows and drawn inquiries, it appears his balancing act has never landed him in legal trouble.

As a senator, we can attest that Whitmire is accessible. He sends flurries of texts to journalists to describe visits with prison inmates, to share a social media post about a gushing water main break, or to send snapshots of a long line of cars waiting to enter the city dump. The texts are part self-promotion, part process, as he tries to engage others in his effort to improve the city.

And by "the city," he means everyone. As a boy, his fractured family moved around a lot. He remembers going without running water and even, for a time, without a home. In early adulthood, he worked as a social worker certifying families for food stamp benefits. He's haunted by the memory of a woman who had a higher-than-expected electricity bill: she explained that she kept the lights on all hours to keep the rats at bay.

When Whitmire dropped out of the University of Houston to run for the House district that included his Oak Forest neighborhood, he was so green on the campaign trail that he knocked on every door — even those where nobody was registered to vote.

His influence in the Legislature wasn't immediate. He acquired the nickname "Boogie," not necessarily for his party boy reputation but for his zippered "boogie-woogie" ankle boots. In 1979, he found himself on Texas Monthly's "10 Worst" list. "Seemed to walk around carrying a 'Kick Me' sign," the magazine noted. His constituents were patient, and eventually he earned a regular spot on the "10 Best" list: "From class clown to steadfast statesman," Texas Monthly noted in 2003.

What changed? One of the most pivotal and sobering experiences of his life happened in 1992, in the driveway of his family's Shepherd Park Plaza home: a robber held Whitmire, his wife and 9-year-old daughter at gunpoint. The gunman fled and no one was injured, but the experience led him to the criminal justice committee and a leading role in writing some of the nation's toughest penalties for violent crime.

Admittedly, we were taken aback by his callous perspective on air-conditioning prisons in the brutally hot Texas summer: The public doesn't support the expense, he said, adding that he has law-abiding constituents in Acres Home without A/C, too.

But critics who assume that he's in league with the hang-'em-high crowd of the GOP are wrong. His concerns about crime are reasonable and responsive — public safety is consistently the No. 1 issue on voter surveys — and we don't construe his concern as fearmongering or cynical electioneering.

Yes, Whitmire talks about putting more officers on the street — not surprising, given that HPD has been under-resourced for decades — but he also talks about enhancing officers' training to de-escalate mental health situations. His idea to invite 200 DPS troopers is worrisome because of the scale but we urge him to keep DPS efforts targeted to specific areas such as gang violence. And while he waxes about "keeping violent criminals behind bars," one of his priorities is building the nation's best second-chance re-entry program to help formerly incarcerated people reintegrate into society. Few people understand the root causes and circular patterns of recidivism like him or have such a keen interest in stopping them.

So, who is Whitmire really? "Boogie" or statesman? Opportunist or maverick? Blowhard or bleeding heart? Humble servant or fat cat? Probably all of it.

"He's WYSIWYG — What You See Is What You Get," says former longtime state Rep. Garnet Coleman.

The Houston Democrat is endorsing Whitmire over Jackson Lee, his own Congress member, whom he admires. Coleman said the decision hinged on Whitmire's talents as a negotiator and as a manager whose legislative staff, Coleman observed, always seemed competent and generally happy to be there.

Coleman remembered hitting a roadblock getting the Sandra Bland Act out of the House. He told Whitmire he'd need to pass it out of the Senate first. "He didn't flinch," Coleman said. "He just shouldered through it. If he hadn't had a cordial relationship with the lieutenant governor, there'd be no Sandra Bland Act."

Coleman, who is Black, said he had no concerns about Whitmire's ability to represent large Black and Hispanic constituencies because Whitmire has done that for a long time. "Obviously, Sheila lives being Black, which I respect," Coleman said. "But I don't think that John has a lack of understanding for what people who struggle need."

We believe that Whitmire can take care of the basics or delegate them to the brightest minds around. He'll need geniuses to navigate the city's projected budget shortfall after COVID relief money runs out. He'll need both realists and optimists to lead Houston efforts in resilience and energy transition. We expect he'll find them.

We wish him well in that endeavor, along with any other challenging, farsighted projects in keeping with this city's history of ambition and audacity. For the man they once called "Boogie," the future is now. As mayor, we urge him to think big. Bigger. And to keep cultivating the leaders of tomorrow. Maybe, when they do at last take over, they'll let him water the horses.