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This is what America's eco-city of the future looks like

Georgetown mayor Dale Ross is 'a good little Republican' - but ever since his city weaned itself off fossil fuels, he has become a hero to environmentalists

by Tom Dart in Georgetown, Texas

172
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12:49 BST

When the caller said he worked for Harry Reid and the former Senate majority leader wanted a word, Dale Ross assumed it was a joke. "OK, which of my buddies are messing with me today?" he wondered.

He shouldn't have been so surprised. Ross is the mayor of Georgetown, population 65,000, and he has become a minor celebrity in environmental circles as a result of a pioneering decision in 2015 to get all the city's electricity from renewable sources.

Georgetown's location in oil-and-gas-centric Texas and Ross's politics add to the strangeness of the tale. The mayor is a staunch Republican at a time when a Republican president - and his Environmental Protection Agency administrator - reject the scientific consensus on climate change and are trying to revive the declining coal industry.

Ross has appeared in a National Geographic documentary, a forthcoming film about clean energy for HBO directed by James Redford (son of Robert) and in this year's follow-up to An Inconvenient Truth, which saw the advocate and former vice-president Al Gore visit Georgetown.

The day after we met at city hall, just off Georgetown's charming main square, Ross was set to fly to Utah to introduce a screening of An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power. Then it was on to Las Vegas to reunite with Gore, a fellow speaker at Friday's National Clean Energy Summit, an event co-hosted by Reid, a Democrat from Nevada. Next week, a conference in Oakland, California. Next month, a green energy panel in Nova Scotia.

"The war on coal is over": EPA boss to roll back Obama's clean power rules

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Dale Ross, the mayor of Georgetown, Texas, says the decision to source all the town's energy from renewable resources was based in cold-eyed pragmatism. Photograph: Katie Hayes Luke for the Guardian

"You should see the fan mail that I get, especially with the movies," Ross grinned. The 58-year-old said the decision to follow the lead of Burlington, Vermont - the first US city to run solely on renewable energy - was not the product of liberal do-gooder vapours wafting up Interstate 35 from nearby Austin. It was based on cold-eyed pragmatism, the fruit of the kind of careful numerical analysis he performs in his day job as a certified public accountant.

"The revolution is here," he said. "And I'm a good little Republican, a rightwing fiscal conservative, but when it comes to making decisions based on facts, that's what we do."

The facts, Ross said, are that when Georgetown negotiated power supply deals the cost was about the same between natural gas and wind and solar, but the natural gas option would provide only a seven-year guaranteed contract whereas 20-25 year proposals were on the table from renewable providers.

Georgetown officials decided to lock in a long-term rate to eliminate price volatility, mindful of the risk that future government actions might send fossil fuel costs soaring.

Prices in the city, Ross said, have declined from 11.4¢ per kilowatt hour in 2008 to 8.5¢ this year. Georgetown sources most of its power from a wind farm 500 miles away in Amarillo and will get solar energy from a farm in west Texas that is expected to be finished next June, meaning the city can attain its 100% renewable goal even when the wind isn't blowing. This year, Ross said, the tally is about 90%, down from 100% in 2016.

"I think it's a big step for Texas, for Georgetown," said Christian Soeffker, who runs a toy shop on the square. "We just like the idea of being in a town that is in some ways special because we've got all that green energy."



Large power lines built to service the oil fields now take energy from wind farms to economic centers like Dallas, Austin and San Antonio. Photograph: Katie Hayes Luke for the Guardian

Georgetown makes headlines not only because so few US cities run entirely on renewables, but because it has a conservative mayor willing to make compromises and fraternise with high-profile Democrats in a hyper-partisan era where climate change is one of the most divisive subjects.

"How is anybody going to compete with wind and solar?" said Ross, who has ordered an electric-powered BMW scooter from California and plans to fit solar panels at his home and office.

All the same, he voted for coal's biggest champion in last November's presidential election - Trump was "like, my eighth or ninth choice" in the primary, he said - and went to his inauguration, which he said was "phenomenal", even if it cost \$700 for a basic hotel room. His support is not unquestioning, though.

"When Trump was campaigning he was talking about clean coal and we're going to bring coal jobs back? That is a mirage, that is not going to happen," he said. "Coal is one of the most expensive forms of fossil fuels to produce. And those jobs are never going to come back, ever. They're done."

As for any policies the federal government might enact to boost the coal industry, such as the decision announced on Tuesday to scrap the Obama administration's Clean Power Plan?

"Isn't that sort of like putting a Band-Aid on somebody that has terminal cancer?" Ross said. "I'm not the smartest guy in the room but it's not that complicated, OK? How's fossil fuels going to compete in the next five years? They're not going to be able to compete."

'We have so much that is ideal for solar'

Texas is the US leader in wind energy capacity, even as many of its politicians maintain absolute fealty to fossil fuels that are a key economic driver and still the supplier of most of the state's electricity. It has lagged behind other states in solar capacity but is starting to realise its potential.

"We have so much area in Texas that's ideal for solar," said Joey Romano, a 35-year-old with a small solar farm 50 miles west of downtown Houston. "Solar and wind, unsubsidised, today already can compete with coal," he said.

Local Sun has about 100 residential customers. Completed at the end of 2015, the farm is located in a rural county that gave Trump 79% of the vote. But Romano said local officials recognised the potential for jobs and revenue and were happy to help the project get off the ground. Beehives stand among the 15,000 panels.



Local Sun, near Houston, has around 100 customers. Photograph: David A Brown/Local Sun

"We call the programme 'farm-to-market solar energy'," Romano said, at his office in central Houston.

Local Sun is a boutique operation in partnership with MP2 Energy, a retail company owned by Shell, and it is designed to attract those willing to pay a small premium for an eco-conscious local product, much as food shoppers might spend a little more for organic groceries.

Texas city opts for 100% renewable energy - to save cash, not the planet

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However modest, its very existence feels like a significant marker in a city that is known as America's oil and gas capital but is in fact the nation's biggest municipal user of green power.

On the other hand, environmental activists worry that solar's growth will be stunted in Texas and across the country if, as appears likely, the Trump White House imposes prohibitive tariffs on imported solar panels.

"They may harm thousands of installation jobs in favour of a few hundred manufacturing jobs, so that could hurt," said Jim Marston of the Environmental Defense Fund, who believes renewable energy will thrive even if federal incentives end and barriers are erected.

"You can't stop the technology. It's too good, the prices are too good, and people want it," he said.

Ross agrees that market forces will prevail. On Friday, the day of the clean energy summit, Texas's largest electricity producer announced it would close two more coal-fuelled power plants in the state.

Luminant cited challenging economic conditions including low wholesale and natural gas prices and the growth of renewables. A week earlier, the company said that in January it will retire a large coal-powered plant in east Texas.

"We were on the frontier of the fossil fuel business, oil and gas," Ross said. "And now Texas again is on the frontier of the new energy that's going to be the future."

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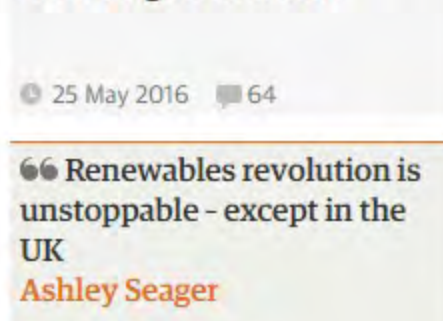
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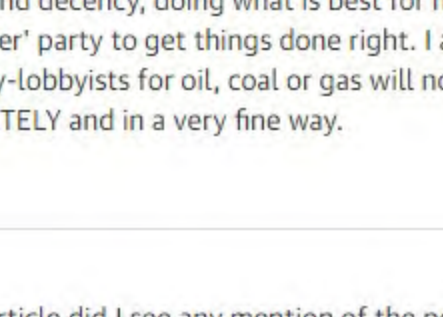
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sblejo 25m ago

A man with common sense and decency, doing what is best for his town not his own pocketbook. A man working with the 'other' party to get things done right. I am completely stunned anyone like him exists in this country-lobbyists for oil, coal or gas will not effect his attitude, he is completely unique, COMPLETELY and in a very fine way.

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reformedleftist 1h ago

Funny, but nowhere in this article did I see any mention of the population of Georgetown, TX. For those who are curious:

"Georgetown is a city in and the county seat of Williamson County, Texas, United States, with a population of 47,400 at the 2010 census and apopulation of 63,716 at the 2016 Census estimate."

I'm pretty sure you could power a city of this size with a team of electromagnetic hamsters running on wheels.

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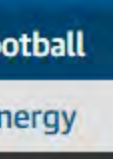


Iain Smith → reformedleftist 43m ago

The population is stated in the second paragraph...

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reformedleftist → Iain Smith 39m ago

Ah, correct you are sir, my mistake. I somehow missed it even though I read through twice in search of the figure Nonetheless, my overall point is still a valid one.

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