



Commentary: We need to keep Austin weird by making Austin wealthy

OPINION

By Carey W. King - Special to the American-Statesman



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Keep Austin Weird. The slogan is everywhere – on shirts, coffee mugs and bumper stickers.

And yet Austin seems to be losing its weirdness.

Downtown music venues are struggling. Leslie Cochran, the scantily clad homeless peace activist who ran for mayor, has passed away. Perhaps the clearest sign of losing our weirdness is that Austin hosts a Formula One race – a combination of glamour and technology that leaves no trace of “weird” in its tracks. But such are the challenges of a growing city.

Some weirdness remains. Just take a look at the early mornings at Barton Springs Pool. Austin is the largest city that doesn’t host a major league sports team. And we still have vibrant movie rental stores.

But I think we need a new slogan: Make Austin Wealthy – and by “wealthy,” I mean emphasizing all kinds of assets; and by “Austin,” I mean every person and neighborhood in the city.



Ricardo Sanchez rides his pedicab during the Austin Pride parade in downtown Austin on Aug. 27.

Most of the time when we think about wealth, we think of money or financial capital. We also usually consider how many assets we own either individually — such as homes and cars — or collectively, such as buildings, roads, and water and energy systems. This is built — or physical — capital.

But there are other forms of capital that we need to consider to ensure a vibrant community and economy.

Natural capital is the water, land, trees, animals, clean air and other natural resources that surround us. Political capital is access to structures of power and the ability to influence rules that shape the distribution of resources, such as the district-based representation on the Austin City Council. There is human capital. Austin has this in spades – the sum total of knowledge and skills acquired through educational channels. And we have cultural capital — cultural understandings and practices that shape how we grasp the world. Keep Austin Weird was about buying local to maintain local character.

The increasing social tensions in cities across the United States is the reason these ideas are important. These tensions are sometimes manifestations of racial injustice, voter redistricting or income stagnation and inequality. No one wants increased social tension in Austin, but our city is not

immune. At least one study shows that the Austin metro area is among the most economically segregated in the country.

These tensions ultimately stem from the recognition that the rising tide of Austin's prosperity has not lifted all canoes on Lake Austin, but that perhaps it has lifted all yachts on Lake Travis — when there is water.

Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, the cost of the core goods of energy and food were getting cheaper until around the year 2000. After 2000, they have become slightly more expensive. For 200 years, human ingenuity — beginning with the advent of the steam engine for producing coal — had continually enabled us to prosper while making our core needs more affordable. But since 2000, that's no longer the case.

This and other feedbacks from our finite Earth are applying pressure to separate local communities, between those adapted to a globalized world and those that are disconnected. We hear this in the speeches of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. They both claim to be against new free-trade agreements. However, Pandora's box has been opened, and we can't put globalization back into it without some ramifications.

We usually focus on increasing wealth — and we still can and should. But what we can more directly choose is how to share all various forms of wealth that we have, no matter how much there is.

The past century was about unrestricted growth in a resource-abundant world. This century is about reorganizing an increasingly unequal society in an increasingly resource-scarce world to enhance cooperation. Austin's smart. Austin's still a little weird. Perhaps the weirdest thing we could do is to become the best city in the world at spreading the wealth. Let's increase the distribution of capital within our capital city. Keep Austin weird by making Austin wealthy – all of it.

King is a research scientist and assistant director of the Energy Institute at the University of Texas.

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