



Santa Monica Mayor Glean Davis. Credit: Kristina Sado

Santa Monica conjures images of sunshine and surfing, but the southern California city should rightly be known for sustainability, too. The City Council adopted the Santa Monica Sustainable City Program in 1994; twenty-five years later, the city has implemented projects ranging from building retrofits to renewable energy programs, with a new mayor every one to two years ensuring fresh perspectives. **Glean Davis** was sworn in as mayor in December 2018, having served on the council since 2009. Active in the community since moving there in 1986, she has been involved with organizations including the Santa Monica Planning Commission, WISE Senior Services, and Santa Monicans for Renters' Rights. As corporate counsel for AT&T, she has worked with Kids in Need of Defense, which represents unaccompanied minors in immigration courts. Before joining AT&T, Davis prosecuted civil rights violations as a trial attorney at the U.S. Department of Justice and was a partner at the law firm of Mitchell, Silberberg & Knupp. A native of California, she holds degrees from Harvard Law School and USC. Davis and her husband, John Prindle, have one son. She spoke with Lincoln Institute Senior Fellow Anthony Flint for this issue of *Land Lines*.

## Santa Monica Goes All-In on Sustainability

**ANTHONY FLINT:** Does Santa Monica's system of having a mayor for two years present a challenge for sustainability efforts, which often are slow to get going—and to pay off? What are the projects that can have the greatest impact through your upcoming term?

**GLEAM DAVIS:** I don't think it creates much of an impediment to the sustainability agenda. The mayor and the mayor pro tem are members of the entire city council. The city council sets the policy, adopts the budget, and drives the city's policies. Then it's the city manager who does the implementation. Whatever policy direction is given to the city manager is from a vote of the full city council.

On the sustainability front, the big news is we are now part of a group called the Clean Power Alliance, where the default provision for customers is power that is 100 percent sourced from renewables. This is helping us take a big leap toward energy self-sufficiency. People can choose to shift into lower tiers, such as 50 percent renewable, or they can opt out entirely. There are also discount options for low-income families. So far the opt-out rate is very low.

Another continuing thread is providing mobility choices. We live in a compact city, less than nine square miles, and we have the ability to provide transport options to our residents. We have light rail with three stations, so you can take transit to downtown Santa Monica or downtown LA. For our Big Blue Bus [which runs on natural gas and is moving toward an all-electric fleet by 2030], we have a policy of 'any ride, any time,' so

students can get on a bus, show an ID card from any college—a lot of UCLA students ride those lines, and of course [students from] Santa Monica College—and it's free.

**AF:** The city's overall greening strategy has included a first-of-its-kind zero net energy ordinance for new single-family construction and a commitment that all municipal power needs be met by renewables. But the new \$75 million municipal building project has been criticized as too expensive. How can being green be cost-effective?

**GD:** What's important to know is, we're leasing a fair amount of private property for government offices, at a cost of roughly \$10 million a year. We needed to bring employees into a central location, which will save money on

leases, and will encourage face-to-face and 'accidental' meetings that can be so important to communication. It just made business sense to have everybody under one roof. We'll end up saving money over time, and ultimately the building will pay for itself just on that basis. There will be additional savings over time if the building is energy neutral and has reduced water intake—we won't be consuming resources outside the building.

One of the things we've done is require developers to meet pretty stringent sustainability requirements. If we're going to do that, we need to walk the walk. That's one of the things this building shows—it's possible to build an aggressively sustainable building that will ultimately bring savings. We're trying to be a model, to show that with a little up-front investment, you can have a big impact over time.

Santa Monica's new City Services Building will consolidate municipal operations while aspiring to be one of the greenest buildings in the world. Credit: Frederick Fisher and Partners



**AF:** How does the Wellbeing Project, which won an award from Bloomberg Philanthropies for its ongoing assessment of constituents' needs, connect to your sustainability efforts? What has it revealed?

**GD:** We declared ourselves a sustainable city of wellbeing. How are the people in the community faring—are they thriving, or are there issues? The Wellbeing Project began as an assessment of youth and how they were doing, and what can we as a city do to try to help. It's really about changing the relationship between local government and people. It's not really a new concept—it goes back, not to be corny, to the Declaration of Independence: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That doesn't mean people going out and having a good time, but the ability of people to thrive. A sense of community can get frayed, whether due to technology or culture. One of the things we do is make sure children enter kindergarten ready to learn. For our older citizens, [we ask] are they feeling isolated in their apartments? It's a global movement we're thrilled to be a part of.

In our Wellbeing Microgrant program, if people come up with something to build community, we will fund it, up to \$500. One example was going out and writing down the histories and memories of Spanish-speaking residents in the many parts of the community where English is a second language. Another was a dinner to bring together our Ethiopian and Latino communities. One individual took a vacant lot and created a pop-up play area and space for art. It's about community connectedness.

**AF:** Another innovative strategy is to impose charges on excess water use to fund energy-efficiency programs in low-income homes. In terms of water, what's your long-term view on managing that resource in what looks to be perilous times ahead?

**GD:** The other thing we've done, which will percolate throughout my term and next, is to work on becoming water self-sufficient. We

control a number of wells in the region, but we had contamination [in the 1990s], and ultimately reached a multi-million-dollar settlement [with the oil companies responsible]. We had been getting 80 percent of our water from the Metropolitan Water District [after the contamination was discovered]—if you saw *Chinatown*, that's [the system that] sucks water out of the Colorado River and brings it to LA—and now we've totally flipped that, and we're getting 80 percent of our water from our own (restored) wells again. This makes us more resilient in case of an earthquake affecting the aqueducts or other disruptive events to water infrastructure, like broken water mains. Pumping water over mountains [from the Colorado River] also takes a lot of energy. We are making sure our water infrastructure is sound. We're not trying to isolate ourselves. But by getting water from our own wells, we will have good clean water for the foreseeable future.

**AF:** What policies would you like to see that might limit the devastation so sadly seen in the recent wildfires in California?

**GD:** Luckily Santa Monica was not directly affected by the Woolsey Fire. Our neighbor Malibu was—their emergency operations center was right in the path of the fire, so they came and used ours, for fighting the fire, rescuing people, and cleaning up. We had Santa Monica firefighters on the ground throughout the state under mutual aid. We hosted meetings with FEMA on displacement and recovery. We have a chief resiliency officer, and she is a steady drumbeat, reminding people [that a major natural disaster] could happen here. We have promoted the Seven Days Plan—does everyone have seven days of water, food, and an emergency radio that doesn't require electricity? We also passed aggressive earthquake requirements, evaluated properties that are most vulnerable, and are now moving to seismically retrofit them.

These things we do in Santa Monica may seem a little aggressive, and cost money, but it's not just about winning awards or patting ourselves on the back for being environmentally



Santa Monica's Big Blue Bus, which runs on natural gas and is expected to be all-electric by 2030, is part of the city's commitment to providing mobility options for all. Credit: City of Santa Monica

progressive, it's so that we'll be able to weather things like fires. People say you're spending money, raising water rates, and it costs more for energy ... we want to do it to address the impacts of climate change. But it also means that when there's a natural disaster, we are more resilient.

**AF:** The city's experience with electric scooters—I'm referring to the company that deployed a fleet without asking permission—seemed to show that the transition to a sharing economy coupled with technological innovation can be messy. Is it possible to welcome disruption and maintain order?

**GD:** We were sort of ground zero for scooters. It was disruptive at first, and we had to make a lot of adjustments. Their philosophy was that it was easier to ask forgiveness than permission. There was some panic, and some people were also using them in a horrible manner. Now we're in a 16-month pilot program, where we selected four dockless mobility operators: Bird, Lime, Jump, which is part of Uber, and Lyft. We created a dynamic cap on the number of devices on the street, so they can't put out as many as they want. We have some policies to address

conflicts and safety, and we have issued tickets when necessary.

This is all part of giving our residents lots of mobility options. It's all designed to give people the option to get out of their car, whether it's going to downtown LA or walking two blocks to a neighborhood restaurant. We wanted to make sure our more economically diverse communities had access, so it's not just downtown. If you can replace a car with alternative means that include scooters or electric bikes for that first or last mile, that's a big cost savings. We had about 150,000 rides on shared mobility [in November 2018]. That's pretty amazing for a place with 93,000 people. At the end of the pilot, we'll evaluate everything and figure out where we go from there.

A number of neighboring cities banned scooters outright, but that's not how Santa Monica deals with technology. We're figuring out the best way to manage the disruptive technology. Disruption isn't a four-letter word. □

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