Following two failed runs, the election-night victory was especially sweet for Turner. cation, since neither of my parents graduated from high school.

Houston has been celebrated for its economic dynamism and racial diversity, but now the protracted collapse in the price of oil and a looming reversal in its overheated real-estate market will likely exacerbate the city’s financial problems. The police force is considered understaffed, and faces controversies and lawsuits over questionable officer-involved shootings that have been detailed in The Houston Chronicle and The Texas Observer. Meanwhile, Turner took office facing an estimated $160-million budget gap that must be addressed by July, atop the city’s $3.3 billion in general obligation debt that will come due in the next five years and a $2.4 billion in unfunded pension liabilities, among the highest in the nation. (The total pension bill is $5.6 billion, with retirement payroll contributions now consuming 20 percent of the city’s budget, according to Texas Monthly.)

But the main reason Houston can’t fix its streets or hire enough police officers to patrol them is that in 2004 its voters approved a draconian revenue cap that limits increases in property-tax collections to the combined rates of inflation and population growth, or 4.5 percent, whichever is lower. Last year the city took in too much money, so it was forced to cut tax rates to the lowest level since 1987. “We’ve got a cap that says, even when a growing city generates...
a certain amount of revenue, we can't take advantage of it," says the mayor, clearly frustrated. In March, citing that cap, the city's high fixed costs and unfunded pension liabilities, and low oil prices, Moody's Investor Services downgraded Houston's general obligation limited tax rating to Aa3 from Aa2.

Turner ran a diligent, if anodyne, campaign, during which his opponent accused him of not having the stomach to implement reforms to fix Houston's financial crises. But he has moved surprisingly fast since moving into City Hall. He has already announced layoffs and across-the-board budget cuts for city departments and city councilmembers’ discretionary funds; the only sector spared was the police force. He is also developing a 10-year fiscal plan that is likely to take on the “self-imposed” revenue cap, a divisive issue among voters. “I think you win people over by showing them that there is new management, and that government can work for them,” he asserts. “That it’s responsive to their needs—not to my needs.”

An optimist as well as a fighter, Turner takes a long, somewhat personal view: “I’ve lived through hard financial times, and the city’s facing financial challenges right now. We are going to engage in shared sacrifice, and we will work through it.” Once the crises are resolved, infrastructure can be developed to sustain the population growth, he says. “Quite frankly, I don’t think there’s another city in the country that’s in a better position than we are.” He pauses, leaning forward in his chair, a slight grin on his face. “And we’re going to keep fixing the potholes.”

Michael Hardy is a freelance journalist based in Houston.

The HAA nominating committee has proposed the following candidates for Elected Director (three-year term):

**David Battat ’91**, New York City. President and CEO, Atrion Corporation.


**Victor Jih**, J.D. ’96, Los Angeles. Litigation partner, Irell and Manella LLP.

**Eliana Murillo ’10**, San Francisco. Head of multicultural marketing, Google Inc.

**Trey Grayson ’94**, Fort Mitchell, Kentucky. President and CEO, Northern Kentucky Chamber of Commerce.


**Michael C. Payne ’77, M.D. ’81, M.P.H. ’82**, Cambridge. Attending physician, department of internal medicine, division of gastroenterology, Cambridge Health Alliance.

**Rye Barcott**

**David Battat**

**Susan M. Cheng**

**Farai N. Chideya**

**Trey Grayson**

**Janet Nezhad Band**

**Victor Jih**

**Eliana Murillo**

**Michael C. Payne**

**Rye Barcott**

**David Battat**

**Susan M. Cheng**

**Farai N. Chideya**

**Trey Grayson**

**Janet Nezhad Band**

**Victor Jih**

**Eliana Murillo**

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