

# Communication a priority for public works pick

Parker says her choice for director, an engineer with Louisiana roots, must improve conversation with residents

**By Mike Morris**

Dale Rudick, an engineer whom Mayor Annise Parker tapped Wednesday to run Houston's mammoth Department of Public Works and Engineering, has a joke about introverted engineers.

It goes: "How can you tell if an engineer is a good communicator? He looks at your shoes rather than his own shoes when he's talking to you."

To Diane Schenke, who heard Rudick tell it, that line is funny largely because she and others say he is a gifted communicator.

Rudick will need those skills to manage a 4,100-employee, \$2 billion bureaucracy that Parker, in announcing his appointment, said must improve its communication internally, with the public and with the City Council.

The mayor said she expects the 56-year-old Louisiana native to make the department more flexible and willing to adopt the best practices from around the country in road, water, sewer and drainage projects. The City Council in two weeks is expected to confirm his nomination.

"What I hear a lot from neighborhoods is that Public Works doesn't do things with the neighborhoods, Public Works does things to the neighborhoods," Parker said. "The goal is to have a more communicative and collaborative process. That's not a new initiative, that's simply a change of attitude and a reorientation of existing priorities."

Rudick has been a deputy Public Works director since September 2011, when he was hired to inform the public and City Council about the progress of ReBuild Houston, the divisive, voter-approved program that levies a drainage fee on property owners to fund street and drainage repairs without incurring debt.

Better communication will be a priority, Rudick said Wednesday, as will implementing the mayor's executive order calling for Complete Streets — essentially, for cyclists and pedestrians to be considered in street designs.

"It's very important that you make the public feel as though they are part of the decision," Rudick said. "It's not so that necessarily they are going to agree with you, but at least they understand where you're coming from and you're willing to take their input so you can make a better product for everybody to enjoy."

## Backers and detractors

Many City Hall observers cheered the appointment, including Councilman Larry Green, who chairs the council's Infrastructure Committee.

"We were able to make some tweaks with ReBuild Houston only because he was listening," Green said. "Some of the challenge with Public Works is that oftentimes they're so institutionalized it's hard to move that ship, but with Dale coming in ... it allows for new ideas."

Progressive urban planning advocate and former councilman Peter Brown said Rudick "understands the fundamental policies needed to transform this old-fashioned, inefficient, and over-staffed city department."

Schenke, who runs the Greater East End Management District and attends St. Paul's United Methodist Church with Rudick, agreed.

"He's both a competent engineer, plus he's got a great deal of understanding on the public policy aspect of how engineering can affect a community at large," she said.

Councilman Oliver Pennington, who serves on the ReBuild Houston advisory board to which Rudick reports, differed.

"The changes to ReBuild Houston to give the council members a measure of approval over projects is an indication

that a large number of people were not happy with his work, and I didn't find him to be very responsive, either," said Pennington. "I just don't think Rudick will be either a good listener or a good communicator."

Formerly in Sugar Land

Born and raised in southern Louisiana, Ru-dick already had a degree in personnel management from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette when he enrolled in 1987 at the University of Houston to study engineering.

He had led a nonprofit in Louisiana and had worked as a real estate appraiser, but it was his time at an oil company that showed him what engineers did. The ability to affect people's daily lives attracted him, and an extra nudge from the oil bust didn't hurt.

"Being in the public sector, you can drive around afterwards and you can actually see your thumbprint on things you did that people don't know you did, but you can see the change," he said. "It's a huge amount of satisfaction that comes from knowing some really intangible, quality-of-life things have been improved just because of what you were able to do."

Rudick joined the city of Sugar Land in 1993 and served 18 years there, rising to city engineer before heading Sugar Land's new intergovernmental relations office.

Pat Walsh, Houston's planning and development director, reported to Rudick in Sugar Land's engineering department.

"Dale is not your typical engineer. He's going to be a stronger communicator, more creative and also willing to look and think outside the box," Walsh said. "He is someone who is very good at reaching out to the community at large."

Sugar Land Mayor Jimmy Thompson said Rudick was successful in representing the city in Austin because of his diligent preparation.

"He's very respectful of the elected officials, but I think what made Dale particularly successful in our case was he worked very closely with all of their staffs," Thompson said. "We had access to just about everybody up there because of his relationships."

'Hard things look easy'

Friends of Rudick's at St. Paul's say that diligence extends to his work as chair of the church council, the top layperson of the 3,700-member congregation. Members marveled last year at his work in transitioning the church to a new senior pastor, the Rev. Gail Williford said.

"He makes hard things look easy," she said. "If Dale is going along with something, people feel comfortable that it's happening correctly." [mike.morris@chron.com](mailto:mike.morris@chron.com) [twitter.com/morris011](https://twitter.com/morris011)

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Dale Rudick is expected to be confirmed by the City Council.