



Inside out

Carlos Martín very publicly walked away from an advisor role to the EPA: Fortunately his day job still keeps him focused on social solutions – smart housing and healthy communities

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As a civil engineer, Carlos Martín could expect to get a few “likes” now and again on his social media feed – occasional affirmations for posts on designing missions, for example, or links to stories about smart sewer flows or the potential of cross-laminated timber.

But when he posted his letter of resignation from the Environmental Protection Agency’s research and development subcommittee, the tweet went viral. More than 10,000 retweets and likes from people responding to his stand against threats to stifle scientific research and the EPA altogether.

On May 12, Martín, along with Peter B. Meyer, resigned from the EPA’s Sustainable and Healthy Subcommittee of the Board of Scientific Counselors, or BOSC, of the EPA. The BOSC is an outside advisory panel for the EPA that serves to counsel the EPA on the validity and significance of the scientific research it conducts. The decision came after the administration did not renew – as was standard practice and expected – the BOSC membership of Courtney Flint and Robert Richardson, who also serve as co-chairs on the committee. In fact, Flint and Richardson were among 9 members of the 18-member BOSC that incoming EPA Director Scott Pruitt summarily dismissed.

In Martín and Meyer’s letter, the two said the effective removal of the co-chairs suggests that their knowledge was not valued by the current EPA administrators. “Like so many of our colleagues in the broader research community, we have deep concerns about the leadership at EPA and its continued obfuscation of scientific evidence and the research enterprise.”

The letter notes the proposed 40 percent reduction for the Office of Research and Development.



Carlos Martín

“We cannot in good conscience be complicit in our co-chairs’ removal, or in the watering down of credible science, engineering and methodical rigor that is at the heart of that decision,” Martín and Meyer wrote.

Martín came to the EPA no stranger to federal service. For eight years he worked at the Bureau of Housing and Urban Development, under both the Clinton and Bush administrations, as part of the Partnership for Advancing Technology and Housing, or PATH program.

Today, Martín is a senior research associate in the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center at the Urban Institute. In his work there, he directs research and evaluations on the physical qualities of housing and communities, as well as the industry behind them. To the federal agency, Martín came with the mindset around making housing equitable and sustainable, and understanding its role in creating social outcomes.

But it was not to last.

Joanne Zuhl: *That had to be very difficult to resign from your role with the EPA, because this is a position, at least from our vantage, where you can make a difference – and then to find it’s made untenable.*

Carlos Martín: It was a painful decision for me. It was a hard one to come by. I really liked being on this committee, but I feel like to be an effective insider you have to be on the inside. And there was no evidence that anything the subcommittee produced would be listened to by anybody. I just didn’t want to be a shill for that – for somebody putting out a message that I, in many ways, was complicit with. I couldn’t do it.

It’s been interesting seeing the tweet replies that have come back. Clearly we got responses from other subcommittee members, and I did get a response from the Office of Research and Development saying we’re sorry to hear this.

But the bigger reaction that I’ve gotten is from the Twitter world. The majority of the replies are really positive. There were a couple of responses that I would think would typify a right-wing response. And there were some responses from the left that were actually critical of the decision because now there’s an opportunity to put more industry people in or fill the board with climate change deniers. And I totally get that, I totally respect that opinion. That was not my decision.

J.Z.: *I have that same question about the remaining membership, and those left behind. What’s your response to the criticism that if you leave you can’t be in the right place at the right time?*

C.M.: I respect that. I won’t speak for the subcommittee members who chose to stay

on, but the majority of them did choose to stay on and wait out their terms to see what would happen. I personally couldn’t do that. Personally and professionally. One, I can’t be privy to any kind of messaging that is counter to what scientific evidence supports. Two, I didn’t see it as a tenable strategy to be an insider trying to push for change, when there was no evidence that that was going to be effective.

J.Z.: *You were talking a bit about the pressures coming down from this administration. Can you give our readers a sense of what was coming at you? What were you seeing happening?*

C.M.: Even just from the gut punch of Courtney (Flint) and Robbie (Richardson) not being renewed, without any notification after it happened, was clearly a sign that something was off. They had been told, and they had told us, that they were likely to be renewed. That was the straw that broke the camel’s back. But clearly the proposed budget cuts to the EPA’s Office of Research and Development, the language around climate change in particular, is one of the environment issues I’m most concerned with. And the rhetoric we’ve been seeing around changing the composition of scientific advisory boards in the federal government in general, but particular the EPA, to include more industry representation.

J.Z.: *For a lot of people concerned about the environment and climate change, it’s scary to hear about the changes happening. What can we do about this? Are you looking at other ways to engage?*

C.M.: I still have my day job. I’m still a researcher, and I feel like part of my obligation – as the professional tradition I’ve chosen to enter – is to continue doing my own research, and doing it rigorously and soundly.

I’m an engineer by training, and engineers aren’t taught to be good activists, but I think we’re seeing a sea change in the civil commitments: Everybody from scientists, to engineers to medical physicians and public health practitioners are starting to see. I always point to people like Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha in Flint, Mich., who started noticing that all the kids she was seeing had high lead exposure. And the civil engineer (Marc Edwards) from Virginia Tech who was the one who started testing the water in Flint on their behalf. These are people who are realizing that, you know what, we have a commitment. Part of our job has been to uphold public safety, in addition to ensuring that our work is rigorous and peer reviewed.

Technically my doctorate is in civil engineering. Just the beginning of that phrase – civil – means we’re inherently tied to the public infrastructure to promote the public good. The early civil engineers were the ones who created sanitation systems, water delivery systems, transportation for people to get from one place to another. These were civil goods – public goods. I’m lucky enough to be an engineer in that way.

J.Z.: *You joined the EPA about two years ago. There has been real progress made over the 50-year history of the EPA. What progress was there to be made? There’s a lot at stake.*