

Transcript

On West Gray, Episode 4, Meet the Mayor w/Larry Heikkila

Runtime: 15 minutes 26 seconds

Tiffany Vrska 0:16

What's up, everybody? Welcome to On West Gray, the monthly podcast about all things local government in the city of Norman. I'm your host, Tiffany Vrska, Chief Communications Officer for the city of Norman, and we appreciate you tuning in. Today we have a very special guests with us, our new mayor, Mayor Larry Heikkila is here in the studio with us, and we're excited to hear all about his first several weeks in office. Mayor, thank you so much for being with us.

Larry Heikkila 0:40

Thank you for having me. Absolutely.

Tiffany Vrska 0:43

So as you continue to make introductions across the community, and build upon relationships and partnerships throughout Norman, we wanted to invite you in here on the show to share a little bit about yourself and a bit about the direction that the city is moving in right now. So again, we really appreciate you being with us. You were sworn in as mayor on July 5, and council chambers, even much of the lobby area, was jam packed. What were your feelings that evening? And how would you describe the moment that you took the oath of office?

Larry Heikkila 1:14

It was pretty cool. In my opinion, it was very nice to have that many supporters that wanted to see that done. That wanted to participate in that moment. Obviously, it was a change. I'm much different than Breea Clark and her philosophy in the way that we do things. Throughout the campaign, we had wonderful groups of people who were extremely supportive in what they did. They wanted to be part of that as a final thing that they can do. In our campaign, we'd done cars driving around doing their parades all the time, there were people with signs or all kinds of stuff. And this was just the final moment. They still watch on TV, just to watch the council things.

Tiffany Vrska 2:03

Sure. Yeah, I remember I was trying to get in there to get photos. And there was a lot of people with cameras in there. So we're like trying to get our space in there. But it was a good showing. So I'm sure

that you're very proud. And congratulations. So it's been a busy and exciting time for you. And we'll get into some future plans here shortly. But could you tell us a little bit about your background? You may have been sworn in as mayor on July 5, but this is not your first role in public service, right?

Larry Heikkila 2:32

No, most of my life has been spent in public service. I spent 26 years in the Navy, most of that it was doing public works kinds of things, civil engineering stuff. I spent 17 years at the city Norman. I came in as street supervisor then went up to personnel. It was called personnel and it wasn't HR. And I worked as a safety manager and developed the safety program that we I guess still have. And so all of that has been in public service, that service is one of the things that our family really centers on with our girls with us as to how we can be of service to the community.

Tiffany Vrska 3:18

Sure, I call it the highest form of religion, serving other people, servant leadership. Not an easy gig, but very rewarding. So how would you describe your leadership style? And what do you think your overall vision for the Norman community is?

Larry Heikkila 3:37

Leadership style is basically a cooperative leadership style. I don't necessarily have to get consensus, but I do have to get agreement with what we're doing in doing things. I don't believe in yelling, I don't believe in throwing things across the room and then doing fits. I think that's weak leadership, it shouldn't be that way. We are able to say the ideas we have, we can disagree. It's not a problem. But we can do so civilly. And that's one of the things that I want to start as, as discussions and it is starting in Norman, is we're so polarized, and we get so much stuff from them. The way that the television works and other kinds of opinion papers, is you have to crush your enemy to be able to have a conversation. That's not a conversation. You discuss the ideas, you find out what you can work on, and work on those. So that's pretty much what we want to do. When it comes down to style, things that are going to change a lot you're gonna see a lot of changes in Norman, if we can affect those changes, will be I'm definitely pro growth. And so what's happened to the city and Norman as a whole is that we've allowed it to start to die. We have not figured out as a group of citizens is that we're at a stage in the city's development where we have to change. We have a turnpike coming through here, don't know what's going to be all about that, that may be 15 years from now, for all we know. We know that we have the SEC coming to town. We know we have different materials and products to build stuff that we didn't have before. We're going to start using all of those types of things. Cooperation with businesses, cooperation with the citizens, cooperation with those that like historic things. Those are like new things. What does that new normal look like? And that's what the citizens need to come in, and tell me. I get emails or I get texts or whatever they say, we want you to preserve this. And I agree, you know, it's just, this is our place. This is our time to grow and go from, I've used the analogy to go from being a teenager into a young adult. We have to make that transition. It can be hard. But it doesn't have to be. There are all the

tools that we need to be able to do this. And it's just a matter of affecting the change that the people want.

Tiffany Vrska 6:15

Well, you sure got your work cut out for you. I always feel like there's so many things going on in our community at one time. I mean, you just named several. So it's an exciting time, I think, to be in Norman, but there's some work ahead of us for sure.

Larry Heikkila 6:28

Oh, yeah. But that's all right.

Tiffany Vrska 6:32

I know a lot of people are curious about the retreat, the council retreat, that was had toward the end of July. You and your fellow elected officials, all eight council members, ventured to a day and a half retreat event where you discussed goals and priorities of the fiscal year. What kind of items were discussed, and what do you hope to see moving forward?

Larry Heikkila 6:51

We discussed a lot of our own visions for Norman, we had an agenda, of course, that we were discussing off, which were leftover problems from Breea Clark. Which isn't a bad thing. I mean, you cannot get everything done that you always want to get done. There's always something that leaves year to year. We discussed those, we discussed a lot of things. Agri-tourism at the lake came up. That's not a normal topic for us. But it's initiated in me. I've tried to get with the Lieutenant Governor's office and see what they're doing on their side. So we can bring that conversation back to council and say this is what the state's doing. What is the board reclamation going to do? What is this group going to do? What is this? And how should we plan? One of the things we haven't done over the years is keep up our development plan. We call it the 2025 plan. We haven't kept that up. So we don't really know where we're going. So we get the opportunity with an almost clean slate to start again. How about development in South East Norman? Lindsay to Alameda, say 12th to 24th. Not a lot of business down there. Not a lot. There's no grocery store anymore. There's no this, there's no that. Let's look at those kinds of areas and build those up. Does that have something to do with the lake? Yes. Because that's on the way to the lake. So what are we going to do to work those things in? Again, big sack with a lot of problems.

Tiffany Vrska 8:26

Sure. And I know you mentioned former Mayor Clark a couple times and I loved the kind of peaceful transition of power. You talked about, you know, civil engagement with fellow elected officials. And I

loved that when you won the election, you guys took a couple photos online, said that you're still going to be working together for the betterment of the community. And I just love seeing that. People who are passionate about their community, still wanting to take on, you know, leadership roles and working together for the advancement of citizens. I just really loved seeing that. So I wanted to tell you that. And then also at the retreat, I understand that you guys had some training through municipal consultants, and I'm not sure what was covered there, if you could tell us a little about that.

Larry Heikkila 9:12

One of the things that came down is we had a fella by the name of David Weatherford come in and what he did was kind of set the tone. He and I spoke up in Tulsa at New Officials training, or whatever the OML training is. And what we decided that we would do out of that is start a handbook. There's a lot of variation between if you look at the council's under each mayor, there's a lot of variation in the way that we do things. Let's standardize it. And that probably comes from my safety background, from a military background, but this is what you do. So if you got a book that says when this happens, this is the appropriate activity to take and just make things easier. Less discussion on anything. It's in the handbook. You guys have a staff handbook. And it works pretty much. And if it doesn't, HR needs to change that. This is our book for us. And it just gives us a set of ground rules. This is how we do meetings, this is how we do everything else. And I think that'll be a good thing. He also set the idea on some goal setting procedures. And so we're going to look at those. That's pretty much underway, people like working towards goals. They don't like working at random. And we'll just kind of keep that up. As to one of the things that I believe the council does not have in this city is the trust of everybody. We haven't done things in a professional manner. That's what we're trying to do. You see a lot of things that happen in council meetings now that didn't used to happen. Our consent docket means we've already consented to it before. So you don't reread it. And we just go on. Well, that saves an hour. And so if you're sitting down there, it does save quite some time. We just got to do that, make them more efficient, make more people like to come here and participate in those meetings instead of going on for hours.

Tiffany Vrska 11:14

Right. So it sounds like a lot of organizational elements and planning, kind of the universal protocol that you talk about. Definitely will add to the professionalism, I think, of the city. So that's good to hear. Well, finally, Mayor, we'll wrap up here momentarily, but I wanted to ask you, is there anything in particular that you'd like to share with the Norman community? Or is there anything in particular that you would like people to know about you?

Larry Heikkila 11:43

The thing I'd like to share is that I'd like to get people to participate in local government. Local government is kind of cool. And it's kind of different than state government. And even in here in the city and in the county, you can see who you live with, you are around the officials that you elected, you have

a lot more access to people. If you want to go visit the president United States, it's going to take heck of along time. You have voted for him but he doesn't care. And so here on our level, we need the ideas of the people that are working with us. We're working on a lot of partnerships. The relationship between the city and OU, the city and the county, city and the state, have all hopefully been buffed up and fixed now so that we can work together, we're spending the people's money, you guys's money. And we're doing it in different factors, we have different roles by the charter. So we're going to work on those together. But the people is the main thing to where they start to input to us. Please do it in a kind manner. Much easier. Things to know about me is I'm working as hard as I can seems like I'm bopping around probably 50 hours a week, and--

Tiffany Vrska 13:05

I'm getting your response emails around 1030 or 11. So I can attest to that.

Larry Heikkila 13:09

It's the only time that I've got time that I can sit. Just like today I meet with Mayor Holt, we're going to discuss some things that we have in common, where do we interface, what do we do. I meet with the other mayors that are around in this area. I don't want something I do to adversely affect them. And so before we do some things, we talk about it. It's just those kinds of things. Give me some time to get some stuff. I don't have a magic wand or 20 pounds of fairy dust. I just can't get it done that quick.

Tiffany Vrska 13:44

Well the collaborative aspect that you mentioned about how local government affects your day to day life so much more than any other level of government. It's so true. I mean, it's the roads that you drive on and the parks that you take your kids to and the buildings that you are in day to day. And so I really love that you're wanting to engage the citizens to make sure that they're a part of that process. That's really exciting. Right now we're doing the Citizens Academy, which is kind of aimed right toward that so people can learn more about all of the different departments and processes and local government so they can be a part of effecting that change that they'd like to see. So I just love to hear that, Mayor.

Well, is there anything else that you'd like to add for wrap up the show?

Larry Heikkila 14:31

Not that I can think of.

Tiffany Vrska 14:31

All right. Well, we appreciate you coming in. Thank you so much. Questions or commentary about On West Gray can be sent into PublicAffairs@NormanOK.gov. Shoutout to our producer and editor Mr. Bryce Holland of the city of Norman Communications Office. Listeners are reminded that we do have a special election coming up on August 23 regarding proposed amendments to the city charter. Log on to NormanOK.gov to learn more about what's on the ballot and access the OK Voter Portal tool through the state election board online to check your voter registration, polling place, and more. Until next time, stay engaged, stay informed and always remember to vote. I'm Tiffany Vrska. Thank you for tuning in to On West Gray.

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>