

Transcript

On West Gray, Episode 5, Norman Parks & Rec w/Jason Olsen

Runtime: 31 minutes 46 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. Thank you all for being with us. Today we have the one and only Jason Olsen, Director of Parks and Recreation, perhaps best known as the director of fun, here in the studio to chat with us about what's going on in his department.

Jason Olsen 0:38

Glad to be here and also known as the director of trees. We're responsible for trees, get a lot tree questions and all that good stuff.

Tiffany Vrska 0:45

Yeah, Norman cares about their trees, man, we have to have one.

Jason Olsen 0:49

But happy to be here, and Parks and Recreation, the best job in the city. We're here to improve the quality of life for everybody. And it just makes our job easy, because we've got so many great opportunities to do that in Norman.

Tiffany Vrska 1:02

I mean, I might have to argue that my job's the best job in the city because I get to tell everybody all the cool fun stuff that you have going on. So we'll jump into some of these questions. I wanted to ask you about and give people some insight about what you do over in your department. So it's the end of summer. Are you coming off of your busy season? Are you about to head into it? Because I feel like your folks literally always have something going on.

Jason Olsen 1:26

Yeah, it goes up and down. I would consider summer probably our most busy season just because everything's open. There's no school and when there's no school, a lot of times parents and community

depend on us for that childcare. We have childcare at all of our rec centers and we like to think of it as an essential service. And not only during the summer when we have summer day camps going on all the time, but during school, we want to make sure that we have affordable childcare and we make sure that they get to do everything else that a lot of these other places do. We go on field trips and go to the pool and bring fun things to the Rec Center. Like Nerf guns and Nerf gun battles and different art opportunities always come there so it's kind of cool but also at Westwood is when we hit high time. The pool, which everybody should know about Westwood pool, it's a Norman Forward project. It's completely crazy during the summer. Open almost 100 days.

Tiffany Vrska 2:28

It was kind of crazy. One time you were sharing with us like how many lifeguards you have to hire each year to make sure that you guys are fully staffed. I mean what is that process like?

Jason Olsen 2:37

It's crazy. So we we have over 100 people on staff at Westwood which is, we like to think of ourselves, not only is this a Norman Forward project but this is a great example how when cities invest in ourselves they create jobs. And this one's mainly creating jobs for high school students or college students. Those people on the younger end of the scale. We hire about 120. There's about 85 lifeguards at any given time. We have to have about 30 lifeguards on deck to watch the pool. There's a lot of water out there. Not to mention the capacity is, I think, 840, so that place can get packed. At the beginning of summer we're we close down because of capacity, overreaching capacity, there's a lot of people waiting out there so it stays busy but the amount of people we employ, we'd like to think of ourselves as the leading opportunity for high school kids to find a job in Norman. We pay well. The minimum wage out there is about \$10 per hour is what we set the bar at and our lifeguards start at \$12. There are a few other jobs that are \$10 an hour like cashier or working inside the snack bar but it's a great opportunity and it's something that the residents love. We have well over 100,000 visitors every year. We do around 750 swim lessons every year and then numerous special events after we close. Movies in the Park. Glow parties.

Tiffany Vrska 4:06

I saw you had a couple Adult nights out there

Jason Olsen 4:10

And then more summer things we do, of course our golf core course picks up. I would say it's decently busy during the summer but our busiest times are spring and fall when those temperatures like right now we're actually tolerable. A lot of things going on during Summer. Of course our parks are most used during then. Our park maintenance crew is out mowing parks every day. They have 65 parks to take care of. So it's a busy time during the summer but like you said it never stops. We roll into a different time of

year where we put on a bunch of special events and do after school programs. Park maintenance is still going maintaining parks all the time.

Tiffany Vrska 4:49

Yeah, and I have to give a shout out to the folks that you mentioned out at Westwood because we recently took the Citizens Academy out there and they loved it. I think that you gained some new memberships.

Jason Olsen 4:59

Yeah, if anybody knows me, I try to make sure, I have a personal contest with the other directors where I try to outdo them all. And I did my best effort during that, you know, giving everybody hamburgers, and a golf lesson, and try to add a little comedy make sure it doesn't stay dry. We're Parks and Rec after fun. After all. I said after fun. Yeah, that might be it might be more like it. But you know, we have reputation to live up to. Not only the TV show, but in town, you know, we are the department of fun.

Tiffany Vrska 5:31

So you mentioned, I think, a couple of your divisions already. But in total, I think that you oversee around 80 employees. Could you tell us about some of your divisions? And maybe if you have a favorite?

Jason Olsen 5:42

Oh, wow. That's a tough question. I love all my departments or divisions equally. We have 84 that actually work in the department. Our newest division is building maintenance, building maintenance oversees all the city properties and buildings. It kind of says inside there. Yeah, we have over 100 city buildings and that includes your fire stations, all your water pump stations, antennas count as buildings, the police stations, rec centers, there's bathrooms and parks. Of course City Hall just kind of runs everywhere. And you know, we're even building and adding on more during Norman Forward. Park maintenance I would always say is the heart of Parks and Recreation. They are the ones that keeps us going. They're out in parks every day mowing and maintaining, picking up trash, getting ball fields ready, doing odds and ends which you'd never think that they would do. They set up for sports, or excuse me, special events. Then we have our park development division. They're the ones that get our capital projects and turn those capital projects into real things. They make sure that there were hitting ADA standards in our buildings and in our parks, our buildings, playgrounds, and putting in sidewalk. We have two LA's, which are landscape architects, on staff and they are very good at what they do. Our newest park planner is Bethany Grissom. She just got out of college and it's the first time we've had two landscape architects on staff, so your probably going to see a little bit more beautification going on and it's exciting. Yeah, some plantings around the city. Then we have the golf division, Westwood division, which is golf maintenance and a separate division actually runs the pro shop. They are a very skeleton crew. They do great for as many people as they have working there. The maintenance definitely has six

full time guys plus a superintendent. That's crazy when you're talking about taking care of over 100 acres and making sure that golf course looks good all the time. And of course our guys on the other side that run the golf shop and pro shop. And then we also have, which you asked about my favorite department. I don't have a favorite, but if I had to pick one, it's the one I came from, it's recreation. I was in recreation, I was at a rec center for 15 years. It's hard to believe.

Tiffany Vrska 8:15

Which one were you at?

Jason Olsen 8:16

Whittier. Pretty cool place. I was there 15 years and worked on so many special events, started so many special events. All those are close to my heart. I feel Veronica, Veronica Tracy, which is one of our newer people that took my old job as a recreation division head, I kind of feel bad for her because I'm always snooping in, trying to micromanage all of these special events because that's what I did so long. I always apologize to her before like, "I'm sorry for what I'm gonna say to you because I know this is annoying, but here it goes." You know, give her some advice on what to do with special events or what we've done in the past, and she's really accepted it. But recreation is great. We do everything from daddy daughter dance, to, you know, Movies in the Park, Easter, Christmas events or holiday events.

Tiffany Vrska 9:05

Well you guys do a great job. So in addition to kind of making sure that all of these divisions are doing their day to day tasks, you're also a part of or liaison to quite a few boards and commissions in the city. What are those?

Jason Olsen 9:20

Oh yeah, of course we have park board, which I am the city manager designee. If you go back and look at the charter there's only two boards that are recognized by city charter that's planning commission and park board. I am the city manager designee to park board which makes sense since its parks and whatnot.

Tiffany Vrska 9:41

Get to meet with Darrell a couple days a year.

Jason Olsen 9:46

Once a month you hop on there and act act like you know everything that's going on in parks, but I really depend on my staff to keep me updated and keep me straight on all that stuff. Public art board. It's basically a shared committee between the city of Norman and Norman Art Council, all kinds of stuff that you can just randomly see, that are artistic that's on city property, it's oftentimes more likely from the public art board. I oversee quite a bit of, Oh, I've got the tree board, I don't want to--

Tiffany Vrska 10:18

I was about to say, are you saving the best for last, because we need to hear about the Tree Board.

Jason Olsen 10:24

I am the director of fun and trees. Yes. Basically, they overlook at historical trees and make sure that there's plenty of education going out in Norman, about what you can and cannot do for trees. We're about ready to do a tree canopy master plan, and that's going to be ran through that committee. So a lot of things going on with that. And then we have a whole load of ad hoc committees. What some people probably don't realize is that every Norman Forward project, every major Norman Forward project, has a citizen advisory committee that goes along with that. And we engage with them. Right about the time that we start engaging with our architects, and they sit there and I have a whole lot of input from the citizens side for all these projects. So you know, you look at Westwood, the libraries had one, the pool had one at Westwood. And now we have one for the Young Family Athletic Center and senior center, Griffin Park and Reaves Park, and we're going to put one together for Saxon. And we think it's important. One of our you know, we're building things and have parks because of residents and the taxes that they pay here. So we want to make sure we get input from them. Because we need to build what people will use and what people want and what people envision. And, you know, even though I like to think of myself as an expert, I'm not truly the expert, your user groups, which are residents, are the experts. And if you create what they want, through the input, your projects are going to be successful.

Tiffany Vrska 12:06

Now, you talked a little bit about some of the Norman Forward projects. And just to catch, you know, our listeners up the Norman Forward initiative was voted up by residents in fall of 2015, and funds quality of life items in the community. I think that you had mentioned, you know, how citizen led that was and has been since the beginning. So you have the ad hoc committees that give you insight and advice. But also, I believe that when the vote was passed, it was kind of ideas that formed from residents in the community. Is that right?

Jason Olsen 12:41

Yes. This is one of the more unique initiatives probably in the city of Norman, like when we have a stormwater or street bond that we're trying to put out there. For those votes, usually that's led by city

staff and, you know, they realize we have a problem and a need to fill and they go out there and they put together or talk to council and put together an election. This one was completely different. We had a group about 15 to 20 residents that traveled all over the country with their kids and realized that they are basically spending every weekend out of Norman city limits and going to Wichita, Dallas, Little Rock, Houston, San Antonio, there are different places to play sports, and that's where Norman Forward came from. Kind of the envisioning of Norman Forward really came from this group of, you know, residents here in Norman that put together a needs list and then put together a package and then asked council to put together an election, and it passed at 72% in October 2015, which is very, very high. When you think about it, it was about about \$150 million, should be close to \$150 million, once we collect that all after a 15 year period.

Tiffany Vrska 12:48

Well, I think that that's really special that it was it was citizen led and citizen driven. So right now, you're overseeing a lot of those projects, some of which you mentioned that started being planned several years ago. So can you highlight a couple for us and kind of tell us where we're at on those?

Jason Olsen 14:13

Oh sure. Right now we got four going on probably, and this is crazy when you say it out loud, but we have about \$65 million in work going on right now. It's unbelievable when you when you actually see what a quality of life or a bond issue or a tax can do for your city but it's reshaping our parks department. The first one that kind of always pops in my head which I will will say forever, and people might be surprised, but I think the most important Norman Forward project is the Senior Wellness Center. This is a place that the aging people in our community have asked for for over a decade and it's been very complicated and very difficult to find a find a spot for it. We finally just settled out at Porter campus on Southeast corner and that's under construction. We kind of kicked off construction, we went a little bit slower while we thought it was very complicated when you have two entities working together and both of them own property, I'm talking about the Norman regional East Porter campus, and two entities because the City of Norman owned a lot of property out there. And of course, the hospital did and, you know, they are a trust of the city, the hospital trust. Basically, it was a jigsaw puzzle that the city owned pieces here and the hospital owned pieces over there and they're trying to put together the puzzle pieces and it was property that's goes back almost 100 years and are trying to get organized, and it took a little bit longer to get that puzzle put together than what we hoped, so we kind of started construction back here, and I'm thinking it was June but they'd been out there for about three months, going crazy and pretty quickly, it is moving quickly, then the difference between this one and a bunch of our other ones was building this was already been a property's implemented, so the at some point Hey, we had to rechange a plat and everything to get the thing going.

Tiffany Vrska 16:30

Yeah.

Jason Olsen 16:30

They have stem walls going in right now. We should see a foundation pop up here pretty soon with steel and all that good stuff and we think we'll be in there by the end of next summer. So about this time next year, we'll be cutting a ribbon and celebrating that project. Another big one we have going on right now is the Young Family Athletic Center. I think this is going to be, probably at the end of it, the most recommended, recognizable Norman Forward project. It has 8 basketball courts, 12 volleyball courts, Norman regional put in a clinic in the middle of it and we'll have 2 swimming pools.

Tiffany Vrska 17:18

So tell me a little about the clinic. What exactly, I mean, can athletes go there yet for their needs or what does that look like?

Jason Olsen 17:26

So this is going to be like an everyday doctor's office as well. So, but they're going to have a few other aspects that make it cool. And like you can go there if you have a sports injury, you can go there for physical therapy, you also go there for training. We followed Richie Split and Norman Regional down to Dallas one day, and we went on a field trip to this place in Frisco, Texas called The Star, and that's where the Dallas Cowboys practice at. And it's actually a public facility. So you can go in there and use that as well. But it's pretty cool. You go in there, and they have tests that you can do on a young athlete, and like they'll realize your weaknesses in your body. And this is something we learned there: Females have traditionally, like female soccer players, are the most likely to tear their ACL. It's like twice, two times more likely for them to tear that left ACL compared to boys the same age, and it's all about DNA and genetics and how well a female goes together. Well anyways, they can do these tests and you can go out there and perform exercise tests and then you can realize, Hey, your left knee is weak. So that's where you need to do your most exercise. Let's focus on getting that built.

Tiffany Vrska 18:45

Proactive monitoring for them.

Jason Olsen 18:47

Bingo. But you know, there's all kinds of cool advanced sports technology and training and performance center, all that is going to go in there. So it's going to be one of the top sports tourism places in the city of Norman and the state and you can kind of think of it, behind OU football, is probably going to have the most tourism attached to it. And not only that, along needed service for our young volleyball players and basketball players, which haven't had a new recreation center or a place to play basketball for almost 30 years. So this is a much needed project here in Norman.

Tiffany Vrska 19:30

Yeah, we are excited to see it. I know I've been out on site with you and it looks massive and it's coming along very well. And this week, if you're listening to the pod before 3:30pm on September 8, you got to get out to the topping out ceremony that we'll have out there.

Jason Olsen 19:46

Thank you. There's a piece of steel that's going to be out in front. If you go to the back of the Embassy Suites parking lot. There'll be a piece of steel out in front of the trailer and go over there and sign it. We want everybody that can get by with it by their design. We're going to have a ceremony. And if you can't get out too early on Thursday, you can sign it then and then they're going to raise it up and put it in there. This is a final piece going into the gym. It's a pretty cool little setup ceremony. Usually, construction companies do this on bigger projects. And it's just basically a way that you know, to have midway celebration and recognize all the hard work they put into. And they also put a tree on there, which is basically this tree, which hopping into it is supposed to help keep everybody safe. Work on the project. So we want that as well.

Tiffany Vrska 20:41

Oh, that's awesome. Everybody needs to go sign the piece of steel so they'll be forever connected to the Young Family Athletic Center. So I also wanted to ask you to tell me about the soccer fields that you guys have going on. And baseball, softball. Those are two of the projects, I think, we get a lot of questions on.

Jason Olsen 21:02

The soccer project out of Griffin Park. So they're on their last phase. Right when Norman Forward passed it was one of our first things that we hopped into. We have a lot going on out there, construction, probably about for six or seven years is doing a little pieces at a time to make sure that the Soccer Association or new Soccer Association keep playing in between. But now we've kind of reached our last phase and it's actually probably our biggest phase, we're gonna go through there. And when we're done, we're going to have 22 soccer fields, 3 concession stands, and 4 restroom buildings out there, and much needed the restroom buildings. I've been a victim of having a small child out there all the way on the east side of the fields and trying to get back to the west side, go to the one and only bathroom in the park. So that's kind of changing now. And it's going to be more parking. 22 soccer fields, and everybody keeps on asking questions on Saturdays, how am I going to get out of the park? Is it going to be better is going to be easier? I feel like you're adding more parking spots and expanding? And the answer is that we're also doing street projects to go along with that widening Robinson putting lights out there on Robinson. I think it's State Street and then at High Meadows drive which is off 12th Avenue. And there'll be a few areas to actually exit out of the park which will hopefully get the traffic a lot smoother. We had our friends at public works to do that study. Parks and Recreation do not do

traffic study, so don't worry about it. We had experts that did that. And hopefully they'll smooth everything out. Then at Reaves Park, here pretty soon we're gonna be wrapping up out there towards the end of the year, hopefully having a ribbon cutting before baseball and softball starts next year. But after we're all done out there have 14 fields and a new T ball Four Plex. That's where the old park maintenance building was. It's almost done right now and a lot of cool things going out a Reaves Park. Improved the festival grounds of course, we have 14 Baseball softball fields, and put in a lot of sidewalks for better walking opportunities out there. So I like to say, if there is another opportunity for Norman Forward that we didn't get done with those projects. We realized once we had especially at Reaves, once we get that budget assigned to us from after the vote, it was, you know, we got probably about 60% done because it's just what we could afford to build. So we think at Norman Forward 2, we'd like to finish those master plans, both at Griffin and Reaves, which there are in place to make those what, you know, residents originally envisioned back in 2015.

Tiffany Vrska 23:52

And I know that some of these bigger types of, you know, capital improvement projects and things like that, it can be normal that they are, you know, 10 to 15 year programs, it makes sense there's a lot of money involved, especially with some of the market changes and supply chain issues. Has that presented a challenge for you in trying to get this done? I mean, what has that process looked like?

Jason Olsen 24:17

Challenge is not even a word that kind of recognizes or gets close to it. You have to think back in the past three years, but three years use constructions gone off depending on what you're looking at anywhere between 40 and 50% of what it was before COVID. So you had a major, you know, viruses took over the world and basically shut everything down and shut down supply chain and then after that, you know which some countries are still treating it harsher than what we are, a little bit different than what we are here, a little bit harder and still have some lockdowns going down, you had a worldwide conflict, and you have inflation and everything else that's going on. It's made it difficult to get these projects done. And then it also, you went from a good example of is The Young Family Athletic Center. You went from what was supposed to be a 15 to 16 month project, and now it's almost 24 months, just because of supply chain. And not only does that cost you more from material, it costs you more for your contractor to be out on site, because you, you do have to pay them a monthly fee to keep on going, it doesn't matter. You know, if it's 15 months or 20 something months, they still have to get the job done. So yes, the markets been very difficult. And I think you can ask anybody that's building major construction projects, or even if you're building a house, you've definitely been affected by it.

Tiffany Vrska 25:49

I feel your pain. Yeah. Well, I just I wanted to shed a little light on that. I do feel for you and your team, and I hear some of the updates at our management team meetings. And so I'm glad that you're still

pushing forward. And I think a lot of these projects are still ultimately ahead of schedule. And so we can't wait to cut all those ribbons.

Jason Olsen 26:09

And to go along with that, I like to thank Council, because every time that we come back to them asking for, you know, describing making change, and in the change in construction prices, they've always been very willing to let us add more money to the construction or help us find a way to get that construction done. Because we don't want you know, we're not scope creeping at all here. We're just trying to get projects done. And it's relief change prices.

Tiffany Vrska 26:37

Right, right. Well, I very much appreciate that. So much of what you do, as we discussed in parks and recreation is really, citizen lead and citizens are so involved. I know that you guys also do like surveys every year right? to gauge the needs and wants and desires of the community. And I think you just wrapped one up recently that we'll learn more about soon.

Jason Olsen 27:02

We did. So typically a NRPA, National Parks and Recreation Association, suggests you do a needs analysis survey every five years. We haven't done one in probably about 15 years here in Norman. We just got one completed right now, it's only been internals. Staff has seen it, we're gonna take it to park board that first Thursday night in October, whatever night that is, and we're going to present it and it's going to show us basically a blueprint of what we're going to do for over the next five years. What programming and what capital projects do we need to seek out and great input we got and as people will see people love their parks here in Norman. And we're above the national average of what people think of their parks in Norman and we work really hard to have programs to have parks and, you know, neighborhood parks, we have 65 total parks and you know, 60 of those are neighborhood parks. So we're very proud of the park system. Norman's set up in a way where you know, there's a new development, they either have to give you parkland or do a neighborhood park or give you fees in lieu of which goes to the closest neighborhood park after that. And, and it's a great system. We get a lot of calls and people try to set up like what we have in Norman. So yes, it says we have a lot of input, and we're going to share that with you. And that's our blueprint on how we're going to operate our department.

Tiffany Vrska 28:35

And that'll go into the parks master plan that'll kick off pretty soon, right, the creation of that? And that is kind of a roadmap for where we're going long term vision.

Jason Olsen 28:46

So we did a park master plan back in 2008, 2009, somewhere in there. And that was a somewhat of a roadmap of how we did Norman Forward even though there's some projects that got thrown in that weren't necessarily recognized here in the the master plan, but Norman Forward checked, if you go through there and look at the 2009 master plan Norman Forward checked a bunch of those boxes, we completed a lot of projects. So it's been 15 years since we've done that. So next year, we'll be doing a different master plan, we're actually going to include trails, which, you know, if you look at what our needs analysis is, it came back trails and green spaces are the number one thing that residents want here, so we're gonna include trails into our master plan, and we're going to be launching that and that's takes about a year process and then right after that, you know, people don't realize Norman Forward doesn't stop collecting taxes till the end of 2030. So we'll probably be using that as some of our foundation to build a Norman Forward 2 and finding out what people want.

Tiffany Vrska 29:53

Well, it sounds like you guys have a lot of really exciting stuff going on. I was going to ask you too, I know that you guys are really connected. You know, social media, online, what's the best way to stay connected and engaged, you know, for our listeners with everything that's going on with Parks and Rec?

Jason Olsen 30:09

Probably the best way is one of two ways you either follow us on Facebook, I think it's NormanOKParks is our handle on Facebook or you go go to our Facebook site or call us and sign up for our email list. We send out monthly email updates, a newsletter every month that keeps up to date what programs we have going on? And of course Facebook is we have several posts today telling everybody where to go and what programs are happening or what to sign up for. You know, sometimes cool pictures and stuff.

Tiffany Vrska 30:43

Yeah. Well, that's awesome. So yeah, everybody make sure that you get to facebook.com/normanokparks or sign up for email newsletters at Normanparks.com or by calling the office. Well, we appreciate you visiting with us. Jason, thank you so much for coming into the studio.

Jason Olsen 31:01

Oh, thank you. I'm glad to be here.

Tiffany Vrska 31:03

All right. Questions or commentary about On West Gray can be sent into public affairs at NormanOK.gov. Shoutouts to our producer and editor Mr. Bryce Holland of the City of Norman

communications office. Kind reminder that to vote in the November 8 general and special elections across the state, Oklahomans must be registered to vote by Friday, October 14. Until next time, stay engaged, stay informed and always remember to vote. I'm Tiffany Vrska. Thanks for tuning in to On West Gray.

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