

## Transcript

### **On West Gray, Episode 11, Public Works w/Shawn O'Leary & Scott Sturtz**

**Runtime: 26 minutes 14 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 pair of guests with us from the Norman Public Works Department Director Shawn O'Leary and city engineer Scott Sturtz. Gentlemen, thank you so much for being with us this morning.

Shawn O'Leary 0:38

Thank you. Definitely. Good morning.

Tiffany Vrska 0:40

Good morning. Now Public Works is organized into six functional divisions, engineering, fleet, streets, stormwater, traffic control, and transit & parking. Together your teams make sure there are roads to drive on and sidewalks to jog on buses to pick people up. There are so many roles and responsibilities that you tend to each day. And you're one of the largest departments in the city of Norman with more than 125 employees. So you undoubtedly have a ton going on day to day. But today we're going to zone in on discussing some current past and upcoming infrastructure projects in core Norman, so let's jump in. Can you give us a look at kind of the investment that has been made in these different projects, maybe the past five to 10 years before we jump into what we have on the horizon?

Shawn O'Leary 1:30

Happy to just say that we think we have the best jobs in Norman, by the way, we get to build things and make the town better. And that's a great example of what's been happening in downtown Norman, I'll go back maybe five or 10 years and mention a few things I think most Norman folks would recognize and appreciate Main Street, of course, as the centerpiece of our downtown Norman, and we did a streetscape project just a few years ago, where we enhance the aesthetics more than anything, but it was also kind of quietly and actually the bigger part of the dollars went into making sure our downtown is accessible. Sidewalks, it's all about sidewalks and being able to move through the downtown if you are on foot or if you're in a wheelchair, if you are sight impaired. And that sort of thing. If you're an elderly person that just has little trouble walking, now you can walk the entire Main Street, both sides of the road and not have impediments in your way you can enter into the end of the storefronts, and so on. So in addition to make it making it more beautiful, I think our Main Street is the

most accessible Main Street in Oklahoma. I think one of the more transformative things that we've done, and everyone probably has forgotten about it, it was called a railroad quiet zone. For those of us who have worked in the downtown for a few years, remember the train horn every about 35 minutes, we get about 30 to 40 trains a day through the core of our city. And until 2017 that came with the horn. You know, after you've been around that sort of thing for a while you sort of zone it out. But it's still there, it's it was still there when you're at the depot for a concert or when you're sooner theater for a show, or even meetings that would be in downtown. And that that train horn was so you know, off putting for all of us. And that all ended in 2017 when the city was able to finally negotiate after about eight or 10 years, what is called a railroad quiet zone, which essentially impelled our company compels the railroad company BNSF to stop blowing the horn unless there's an emergency. So you still hear the horn once in a while. And that would indicate that maybe there's an animal on the tracks or something of that nature. But generally you don't we it's gone quiet. And I think that is probably the single biggest enhancement to our downtown in so so many ways. And I think people who have been here, appreciate that, but maybe others don't realize that that used to be a thing. We got to mention, we think we have the most beautiful library in central Oklahoma Central Library is now up and running. I think that came online around 2019 or so. 2020

Tiffany Vrska 4:21

I gotta tell you when I moved here, I thought that central library was an event center. I was like what is that? That is so beautiful. My husband and I were driving back are driving through and then we saw the sign that said Oregon Public Library Central and I was like That is phenomenal.

Shawn O'Leary 4:38

It is a beautiful, certainly a beautiful architectural piece and it's a it's such a wonderful library. If you haven't been there you gotta go. Again. That is a \$40 million investment. Alone in our in really in our downtown right off just north of City Hall. It replaced a 50 year old library which was a wonderful library For those 50 years, but it was it was sorely outdated. My department recently moved into that old building, and we remodeled it into what we call the Development Center, which is another great enhancement to our downtown. We kicked off James Garner Avenue phase one during the central library project, because it's right adjacent to that, we want to make sure that the road got built, at least adjacent to there. So we didn't have to come back and shut that down later. And Scott will talk about the current second phase of James Garner, which is another, again transformative transportation improvement. I was thinking this morning about Andrews park that is in the still in the process of upgrades of skate park and enhancements to ADA accessibility, other landscaping improvements, just lots of really great things recently a fully accessible playground that our parks group put together. So Andrews Park, again, probably one of the oldest parks in Norman is getting a pretty good upgrade as well. We can't forget Center City form based code if you're into development. Or even if you're not, you're seeing changes in the core of Norman, primarily south of Main Street. But that area between main and the university is getting a real facelift in terms of the private improvements, the kinds of buildings that we're building the kinds of housing they were providing. And as I mentioned earlier, accessibility is at the core of our program and public works, we want to be the most accessible city in

Oklahoma, for those who have disabilities and other impediments that that they are as welcome in all of these places as any of the rest of us who don't have those, those challenges. And I think we're well on our way, we've still got lots of work to do with other sidewalk areas and other accessibility concerns. But we made a real effort. And I think we're making progress in our downtown.

Tiffany Vrska 7:01

That's right, and plays right into our motto building an inclusive community. So I think we're all very proud of the work that public works does, and all of our public servants across the city. And I think now the spotlight may be on you, Scott, to talk about what we have coming up next five to 10.

Scott Sturtz 7:21

We have a lot going on now and a lot coming up in the future. So there's a lot of exciting things going on in downtown. One of the items I think that we always kind of overlook is that council every year, excuse me, gives us money to go towards sidewalks. They cost about \$400,000 a year, but every year, there's an allotment set aside just for the downtown areas about \$30,000 a year. And we use that to make incremental changes to make sure that we're getting ADA compliant. Not just on Main Street, but on the side streets, the north south streets go into Gray going down to Comanche In fact, this year we're working on Comanche. Next year, we'll be working on Webster and Crawford. So a lot of great work has been done through that program. And then also, we have a lot of great projects in our 2019 transportation bond program that

Tiffany Vrska 8:08

I have to stop you real quick because you have to touch on the 50/50 sidewalk program. That is the coolest thing. And I think everybody needs to know that that is available at the city.

Scott Sturtz 8:18

Absolutely. And what most property owners don't understand is that the responsibility of maintaining that sidewalk is actually on the property owner not on the city. So to help with that, every year, we get money through that sidewalk program, it's up to \$100,000 annually. And we burn through that every year, not this time of year. But that money goes towards helping residents repair the sidewalks in front of their homes. So they make an application, we will actually do the work. So basically, we take on all of the heavy lifting for them, we'll go out we'll get it, the contractor will do the costing and then will actually pay all the checks and they just pay us 50% of what the cost is to repair that sidewalk. And because we've tied it in with a larger group of projects, we kind of get that economies of scale. So it actually reduces the cost. So they're getting a lower cost for the work and then still only paying 50% of it. That is something that's really unique to Norman and that most communities do not do so it is a great program. Glad you brought that up.

Tiffany Vrska 9:19

Yeah, we just had to highlight that. Okay, good.

Scott Sturtz 9:23

Then our 2019 transportation bond. We had base we're doing Porter Porter Avenue all the way from Robinson, down to Alameda. And we're kind of doing that in two phases. We had the intersection at Acres pretty well ready to go. So it was the first project we did out of the gates with the bond package, great looking project and it's really a streetscape project. So trying to make that accessible Porter Avenue is not accessible. Anybody tries to use it. There's not even really sidewalks through a lot of it. You're kind of walking through parking lots head in parking to businesses, and it's really not a friendly area for pedestrians or cyclists. So that As the whole goal is to make it that way, so we added in at the intersection of acres and Porter, we added a signal. And when you drive through there, you'll see that we did some really nice amenities. We widen the sidewalk. We have a paver band between the curb and the sidewalk that's gray. It's kind of got a, you know, an old 40s motif feel to it. And it's really nice that we were able to do that. And then we're expanding that now. And we're currently under construction on that project. We're working south of Main Street. So between Alameda and Maine, they're on the east side. And we're coming up on Comanche quick, they'll be closing the the east side of Comanche to pour across that to make sure it's all ADA compliant. A lot of work with the adjacent property owners making sure that what we're doing meets their needs. Some places where they have that head and parking, we're putting in a raised Island, curb and gutter with the sidewalk. And then they'll kind of have a driveway with parallel parking to help offset and try to not take away all the parking. So a lot of great work there was done by everybody on staff as well as our consultant who helped us with that. That project will be ongoing. It'll be should be completed in November is the date we're signing on that right now.

Tiffany Vrska 11:13

Yes, that's always the number one question, when's it going to work?

Scott Sturtz 11:18

Exactly. And we did get some federal funds to help with that project. So we also have federal funds on that one to try to offset some of the costs. Another kind of continue with that. We go on. And Sean had already mentioned the James Garner project, and very excited about that we had James Garner phase two currently under construction. And it's actually part of Norman forward. So it was put in the vote for Norman for the money set aside to do that. Another project that we have federal funding on, but that project is going to go from Flood north of Robinson, you'll get off a Flood at a modern roundabout, a multi-lane modern roundabout

Tiffany Vrska 11:55

Modern roundabout. All right, we get some questions about that. Now, those are supposed to be safer for drivers, right?

Shawn O'Leary 12:02

Absolutely.

Scott Sturtz 12:02

Absolutely. Okay, you take away a lot of those really hard collision points like 90 degrees and head on. If there is an accident, it's more of a Sideswipe. So it's a lot safer for vehicles. But also when we looked at it, and just to get the traffic flow that we needed through there, a roundabout was the most efficient way to do it. And it was cost effective, it really didn't cost us more. Another signal there we felt would have been very prohibitive and really caused a lot of problems with the signal at Flood and Robinson.

Tiffany Vrska 12:30

So a lot of study and research goes into all of these different decisions that you make about projects, you don't just say, hey, that might look okay, there, I like this in this area, right? There's just there's so much work that goes into every step of these projects.

Scott Sturtz 12:47

Absolutely, we spend a lot of time we hire the best consultants we can get for each project, we actually select the one that we think is best suited for that type of project for that corridor. And then we work with them closely, there'll be a preliminary design. And then we get what we call 30% design, which is kind of where we start seeing the project actually flush itself out. But to get there, it takes a lot of work and effort, we're looking at costs, we're looking at what the best thing is for traffic flow. And we won't design a project now if it's not multimodal, and it's not fully ADA compliant. So all those factors have to be put together to make something that works. And then when we can we always look if we can do something for aesthetics. This roundabout, we're working with the Norman Arts Council now, to get an artist to come in and do an art piece with the 1% for art that was part of Norman Forward. So there's gonna be an art piece in the middle of that. So it's gonna be like a, you know, a gateway into Norman, kind of first welcoming as you're coming south, down towards Robinson. So we're really excited about that.

Tiffany Vrska 13:49

And correct me if I'm wrong, but I think with quite a few of these bigger projects, there's a public input element to them somewhere in the process as well.

Shawn O'Leary 13:58

Absolutely. There's a lot of that actually. And I to your previous question, I would say I've had to learn patience as a public works professional, public works director, some of these projects can take goodness, eight to 10 years from the from the time of conception or the maybe the vote of the people to actually driving on that road or driving on that bridge. And during that period, there's an enormous amount of public discussion, input. All of these projects come from the people really, whether it's through the city council, through public engagement sessions, town halls, city council meetings, and ultimately, you know, that set of projects might end up on a bond election as as many of these that Scott is talking about. This morning and in the voters are voting for that. Norman has a really interesting history. Certainly recent history of being very pro transportation. We have yet to lose a transportation election in Norman. If we can only be so fortunate that we With our utilities and stormwater program, but for whatever reason, Norman citizens value transportation, they vote in favor of it, they're willing to pay for it. And over and over again, we see that support, whether it's in maintenance of streets or new streets like James Garner. So we're very fortunate that way. But I think that comes really organically through the community. The people tell us what they want, we put it on a ballot, and then we go out and we as public works, folks get to go out and design and build it. But it doesn't just happen overnight is a long process.

Tiffany Vrska 15:34

Right. So, so we talked about James Garner, and I'm glad that we did, because we've had a lot of questions on that. And as you mentioned, it's a voter approved project, and then the Gray street two-way, you got to tell us about that. Right?

Speaker 3 15:50

The Gray street two-way is going to be a really interesting project. We're, we're well into design on that, we're about 90% design on that project, but it will take Gray street from Porter back to University where it's currently one way going west, and it will be a two way roadway.

Tiffany Vrska 16:07

That's gonna take some getting used to right.

Scott Sturtz 16:09

Gonna be an adjustment. All of my driving here in Norman, it's been this way. So hopefully, I can remember when I get on it.

Tiffany Vrska 16:16

So why was that decision made?

Scott Sturtz 16:19

There were a lot of factors. I think that went into that back when we were doing the comprehensive transportation plan, there was a lot of discussion about this. And there was also a study done on taking Main and Gray two way. And so this was kind of phase one of that. And the reason that we're doing this one now is because with all these other projects coming online, James Garner, Porter, we don't really know what the effects going to be on Main Street. So we're doing this and this is kind of be a good starting point. A lot of the property owners feel that it's better for the businesses, if it's two way. So that's part of the driving factor too here,

Tiffany Vrska 16:54

You don't have to circle the block to get back to the place you're trying to go to right.

Shawn O'Leary 16:58

You can see the signs from both directions. So this really we're not it's not unique to Norman, it's happening across the country. Just like, frankly, I'm old enough to have have learned this in college and my traffic engineering classes back in the 70s. Our central business districts like the downtown were having lots of traffic issues and accidents and parking problems. So the solution to that was going one way that and it was a it was a solution that was used across the country. There any medium to large sized city was we're doing it. I don't think I've lived in a city in the Midwest, it didn't have one way streets, frankly. And now we're all kind of going back to that. Partially because our central business districts are different. Now the traffic numbers have actually reduced. That's not a bad thing. That's a that's a good thing, in many respects. But it's no longer the central business district. It's an entire entertainment district. It's a restaurant district. It's an arts district. And that's wonderful. But with that comes a little less traffic, fewer traffic problems. And the one way just isn't as necessary as it was in 1972. When we did it right here. This recently happened in Oklahoma City, that P one ad program converted a lot of their one way streets or two way. And it's working. And it's really good for business. What's good for our downtown's.

Tiffany Vrska 18:19

Okay. And you know, before before we wrap up here, I wanted to ask you to I think I heard you in a public meeting Shawn the other day say we have 80 some odd bridges around Norman. And so did you want to touch a little bit on that and kind of future plans to make sure that we're trying to best maintain and, and repair and replace those?

Shawn O'Leary 18:42

Thank you. I will we have 85 bridges, what we classify as major bridges in Norman. Norman's a big city 190 square miles so that that 85 Doesn't sound like so many when you look at the size of our city. But like every city, in Oklahoma and probably throughout the country, we have struggled with funding of, I guess what I call major bridge replacements repairs. Many of our bridges are 70 and 80. We have one that's 90 years old. And they just weren't you know, it was never anticipated that those bridges would be in service that long. So it's it's no one's fault. It's, it's, we've kind of hung on with what we have and maintain them the best we could. I would be remiss if I didn't say that none of these are unsafe. I always need to remind myself that if we had an unsafe bridge or something that we felt might be a hazard, I guarantee we would close it tomorrow morning, as we did recently on a on a bridge that we had on on really regular inspections and earlier this year, the 60th Avenue Northeast bridge where it was discovered that one of the bridge beams literally had a hole in the steel beam. It was very serious finding it it was it evolved over many years. But by the time we got out there this year that was serious, our engineering team gathered around the table quickly and we made a decision and recommended to the city manager that bridge be closed immediately. That was an unsafe condition. And now we're striving to find the funding to replace that which is difficult. It's a three or \$4 million project. That's, that's not the kind of funding that we have available in our current budget. So to so to your point, we have now put together a bridge, we call it the bridge maintenance bond program, city council seems to be very favorable to it. We have some more work to do this summer, before it goes public or goes to an election. But we're hoping for an election maybe in the fall of this year, city wide election to Repair and Replace at least 11 of our bridges, and maybe as many as 19 depending on Council's appetite for the size of that bond election. But basically, we've identified those 19 bridge structures, about half of those are replacements about half of those are major rehabilitation kind of projects, they're all pretty expensive to repair or replace a bridge starts in the two to \$3 million range and goes up from there. But if we're successful, and if the Norman voters support that bond election, we would then set out on repairing and replacing those bridges in five to 10 years, again, depending upon the direction from City Council for the final makeup of that program. We're very excited. We've been working on this, our engineering team and Scott's team have worked hard for many years to really get a clearer picture on on those 85 bridges. Which ones need minor repair, which ones need major repair replacement. And we're actively pursuing every grant program we can find there, there is federal grant money for bridges, it's just not enough to do that many. So I think it's going to take a blend of local financing, maybe some federal financing, and we really just need to knock off these 19 old you know, I guess as I said, some of these are 80 years old, get those things upgraded. And then we think we're in a really good place to just maintain the remainder without a major replacement program for several years.



Tiffany Vrska 22:19

Sure. All right. Well, we will be on the lookout for more information on that when your team is ready to present further. They'll there'll be lots of public information as we always do for every election. So is there anything else that either of you would like to share with us concerning your department or upcoming projects or initiatives that have to do with public works?

Shawn O'Leary 22:41

I would if I may Tiffany, I want to none of this is possible without partnerships and collaborations. We do well here in Norman, and I want to give a shout out as we as we talk about our downtown particularly Cleveland County. The county courthouse is in our in our downtown, which is a real asset for Norman. But they the county did something really unique in recent years. And if you don't know this, it was the county government that designed financed and built the the wellness center where we what people are calling The Well. Downtown on James Garner Avenue. It is a jewel of a of an improvement in our downtown. And they are the county is managing staffing that facility if you have any interest in yoga or aerobics or whatever your thing is, there's a program for you. There it is. It is remarkable. And I a shout out to our friends in Cleveland County and the leadership there with the county commission. I have never seen a county government do something like that. And investment like that and investment in wellness in our downtown. It's it's a remarkable thing. And I think there's going to be a lot of momentum built around The Well. The James Garner improvements, walkability, all the things that we're trying to do, but we do it together. It's not the city alone. It's the city, the county, our downtowners organization, our chamber of commerce, all those folks. We are working together to make it better. And we just appreciate being a part of that.

Tiffany Vrska 24:17

Absolutely. It takes collaborations and partnerships, just as you said. Scott, you got anything for us?

Scott Sturtz 24:24

Just that it's great to be a servant making this community better and and that's what we're here for. And we try to be responsive as quickly as we can to those citizen issues that come up. But we're always here to help and we're here we got sidewalk program running and if people do need help with their sidewalks, we're here to to jump in with that 50/50 program to lend a hand.

Tiffany Vrska 24:45

All right, wonderful. And I'll offer a kind reminder to listeners that you all do a phenomenal job of trying to keep people posted on all of the traffic advisories and the upcoming projects that may impact traffic or Travel and they can go to [NormanOK.gov/News](http://NormanOK.gov/News) and filter general advisories if they would like to see anything that has to do with traffic. So we'll go ahead and wrap up. Questions or commentary about On

West Gray can be sent into [PublicAffairs@NormanOK.gov](mailto:PublicAffairs@NormanOK.gov). Shout out to our producer and editor Mr. Bryce Holland of the city of Norman communications office. Listeners are reminded that there will be a city wide proposition concerning water rates on June 13. And this would provide funding for water line replacement, groundwater disinfection, lead and copper line mandates and water service equipment and materials. Check out your polling place, see sample ballots and more at [NormanOK.gov/WaterIsLife](http://NormanOK.gov/WaterIsLife). Until next time, stay engaged, stay informed, and always remember to cast your ballot. I'm Tiffany Vrska. Thank you for tuning in to On West Gray.

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