

Transcript

On West Gray, Episode 13, The City Manager w/Darrel Pyle

Runtime: 21 minutes 46 seconds

Tiffany Vrska 0:00

Hey 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 in the studio with us we have Mr. Darrell Pyle, Norman city manager, Darrell was appointed by the city council to serve as city manager in July of 2019. He brought more than three decades of municipal government experience to the city of Norman specializing in the field of finance. He currently oversees a staff of about 850 public servants and is ultimately responsible for day to day operations here at the city of Norman boss, welcome to the show.

Darrel Pyle 0:57

Good morning. Thank you.

Tiffany Vrska 0:59

So we launched the show in May of 2022. So I'm a little surprised we haven't gotten you behind the mic yet. But I know we've both been a little busy. Yes. But I also know it's entirely fitting of you and the culture that you work to create your the city to always put your staff first and making sure that the spotlights really on them. So with that being said, for people who don't get to work with you day to day, how would you describe your leadership style?

Darrel Pyle 1:24

It, it is an ever evolving management style in that I have the pleasure of managing a professional staff that is well trained, and those professionals are experts in their field. They don't require a whole lot of hand holding. It's more participating to find solutions to challenges that each one of them face in carrying out the mission for their particular departments.

Tiffany Vrska 2:02

All right, well, tell us a little bit about your background. You've been in your current role, I believe, for years. But this is not the first city in which you've served as city manager. Although I think we can agree that it's certainly the best city. Amen. So what brought brought you to Norman? And how did your past career experiences prepare you for this particular position?

Darrel Pyle 2:24

I've been a local government professional for about 33 years, and a city manager for about 18 years. And our first visit to Norman, Oklahoma was in June of 2011, when we brought my son out here as an incoming freshman to the University of Oklahoma. And that was by way of the San Joaquin Valley in California. And the wife and I spent a few extra days driving around Norman just trying to get an idea about where our son would be living for the next four years and really loved what we saw. It reminded us an awful lot of our hometown, but 30 years earlier in history when everybody used to be nice. And we were talking at the time about Well, when I retire. Let's let's move to Norman. And that was the plan. After my son graduated, with his undergrad in psychology, he decided to stay in Norman and go to the University of Oklahoma School of Law. And when he graduated from law school he shared with his mom that he wasn't moving back to California that Oklahoma was far better quality of life. And mom agreed so much that here we are, we really never thought about the opportunity of moving here before we retired. But the opportunity presented itself and I can say it was the best decision we've ever made.

Tiffany Vrska 3:49

Yeah, lucky you guys. Everything seems to just have come together for you.

Darrel Pyle 3:53

I believe things work out for the best. Sometimes without even knowing it is the case here.

Tiffany Vrska 4:00

So you mentioned you'd been in local government for 33 years. How would you say that you've seen city government grow or change in the past 30 years?

Darrel Pyle 4:09

It seems like every year, and it doesn't matter what community you're in. I've got a Rolodex full of friends from across the country. And we all experience challenges every fiscal year. The challenges are different. But fortunately, we all seem to manage to overcome. You don't hear very often about cities, on incorporating kind of reverting back to county government and dissolving even cities that you may see on the news that are dealing with, you know, just devastating financial challenges. There do seem to be ways to cut back right size the ship and continue to move forward. And I don't think it's it's a skill or inability of any one individual, but a collective effort by professionals who are concerned about the quality of service and the quality of life, they are able to support. So the challenges are different every year. Some of them kind of have some familiar aspects to them. But we will continue to strive and tackle those challenges head on.

Tiffany Vrska 5:25

So it changes but it kind of stays the same, and that there's just always a new challenge and a new problem to be solved. Is that right?

Darrel Pyle 5:34

Well, we, you know, we describe the only constant is change. And I think if you come to work every day, that's, you know, one of the best parts of the job is I've never had the same day in local government twice. And it's not, you know, definitely not assembly line type work. But if you're looking for a new challenge every single day, this may be a career for you.

Tiffany Vrska 5:56

I agree. So what would you say has been your proudest moment to date.

Darrel Pyle 6:01

I am fortunate to have worked with visionary elected officials over the years. And we've had some big successes, I had some great successes in California that I'll always be proud of. But the ability to break ground. And as we near the ribbon cutting, have a couple of massive Norman forward projects, the young family Athletic Center, and the adult wellness and Education Center going to be coming online very close together. We love groundbreaking and ribbon cuttings. Yeah, it's rare that you get two big ones ready to cut the ribbon so close together. On top of that, we'll be you know, cutting the ribbon, although it won't be near as sexy at the wash station out at North base. And we're nearing the completion of the utility line maintenance operations building. We've got a lot of things coming up here in the next four or five months that really demonstrate the stick to itiveness. of local government. Things don't happen as fast as people would like. They happen at the pace of government. And we do our darndest to hasten that wherever possible. And we're about to see, several of these projects finally come to fruition.

Tiffany Vrska 7:23

So we just wrapped up the 2023 Norman's City Council retreat where all of the council members partake in presentations and discussions that are centered around creating strategic goals for the upcoming year. Can you give us a recap of what occurred there and what residents may be able to expect or look out for this coming year.

Darrel Pyle 7:45

Every year when Council gathers outside of council chambers, the meetings are open to the public and agendaize. They're not very exciting, I guess. So they don't draw a lot of public participation. But they're not action items. They are discussions and the focus is to achieve consensus on any adjustments. In course, the city of Norman is currently on. We talk about some administrative things, changes in legislation that we will need to address changes in policy council would like to address. And the last phase is the opportunity where council members put on the board, things they would like to see us work on work towards those particular goals and objectives will all be put on one long list and sent back to council for them to individually prioritize those prioritized score sheets will come together. And we'll have a list of activities council would like staff to delve into and bring back information and or recommendations to council policy committees over the next 12 months. And we spent a little time talking about last year's goals and objectives and what we've achieved. And we recognize that sometimes Council puts goals on the list that rank well. They have achieved consensus among council members that these are important items. And they take sometimes a couple of years to actually bring to fruition and the city's micro transit system is one of those those new micro transit vehicles were delivered to fleet services in the last few weeks. They've all been striped and wrapped and ready to go into service on Norman's newest addition to public transit.

Tiffany Vrska 9:57

So everyone needs to download the app norm ondemand

Darrel Pyle 10:01

brilliantly stated, thank you so much. What a great service. And actually the University of Oklahoma recognize the path we were on. And they actually asked to partner with us to provide that service for their student population that may be out late. This may be a safer way to get back to campus, after hours or on weekends. So happy to partner with the University of Oklahoma, and make that student experience here at ODU. Safe and memorable.

Tiffany Vrska 10:32

So that was an example of one of kind of the longer term projects that council had had their eyes on, I think that was kind of two years in the making. So very excited to be able to watch that this past week. What would you say that you are most looking forward to this coming year, I think you named a lot of really exciting projects on the line. So that may be it. But

Darrel Pyle 10:55

they, they the council identified a handful of tasks that we believe fit very well into the effort currently underway to update the comprehensive land use plan for the city of Norman. And in this particular instance, it was of importance to council that when we say comprehensive land use plan, we want the plan to be comprehensive to include things like sewer infrastructure, master plans, water infrastructure,

master plans, storm drain, master plans, transportation master plans, and even an update to the park master plan. So at the end of the day, and this is about a 24 month process, we will have a document where all of the puzzle pieces were designed to fit from the beginning, we will have to tackle issues to address the anticipated population of Norman between now in the year 2045. And identify how many rooftops it will take to provide quality affordable housing for everyone and every price range where potential school sites will be to handle that increased student population where our roads will need to be widened and and traffic safety infrastructure will have to be developed to a higher level to deal with higher traffic volumes. Norman's a desirable place. It is the second fastest growing city in the state of Oklahoma, where the third largest. And we understand why Norman is growing. And I think the secret's out, and those from around the country are starting to recognize how good we've got it here.

Tiffany Vrska 12:36

Absolutely. And the the comprehensive plan that you mentioned, that's going to be quite the undertaking. But how exciting is it? I think it's kind of unique that a city is tackling all of these different plans at one time to make sure that our vision and goals align kind of across the board. Can you speak to that a little bit?

Darrel Pyle 12:57

Absolutely. You know, some of these things. They happen in in cycles over a budget era to some of the things we'll be addressing here in the near future happen over cycles of 50 years or more. The effort that public works is spearheading to return grey street to two way traffic in councils conversations during their retreat. They said you know we see nationwide trends to turn main streets and those subsequent side streets back to two way traffic to achieve a more walkable, downtown environment. And what they see is one way main streets are designed to get you through Main Street, not to Main Street, two way Main Street, two way grey street are a little more accommodating to guests, visitors and shoppers. So the initial plan was after one way Gray was completed. We talked about a future street bond issuance or another funding mechanism to see if we wanted to tackle a two way main and council achieved consensus that nope, as soon as one way, gray streets converted to two a will immediately move forward with a two way Main Street conversion very exciting. Typically, this happens over like 50 year cycles. I've seen communities back in the 70s that took to a main streets to one way for a variety of reasons. And over time, they realize that we like that two way feel. We think it's more convenient and maybe provide a better business atmosphere for downtown to

Tiffany Vrska 14:41

Yes, it's going to take some getting used to I think, well even the concept

Darrel Pyle 14:45

of reverse angle parking. When counsel described a desire to delve into reverse angle parking. We've got a test spot on James Garner Boulevard and it was is amazing how quickly our community community in our parking public took to reverse angle parking. And I believe you'll see reverse single parking on a two way grey and a two way Main Street.

Tiffany Vrska 15:11

We had a lot of media requests concerning that particular project. And I know, Bryce here in the communications office had produced a video about that, and it was pretty popular gained a lot of interest. And so I do think that people are, are behind that new safety measure. So what do you think the greatest challenges and the greatest strengths are here in Norman?

Darrel Pyle 15:37

The greatest challenge I think being faced by any local government community in today's environment is addressing homelessness. If the solution to homelessness was easy, it would have been solved a decade ago, it is the most challenging issue because of the constitutional rights maintained by every citizen. In the US. There is a fine line between issues of protective custody, and your constitutional rights to be free from search and seizure, your constitutional rights of free speech. And when we see conflict between what the community recognizes our needs to help people who are not in a position to seek help, or receive help, there is frustration. We work every single day here at the city of Norman, with our community partners to help identify solutions that we will be well received. We do recognize there are multiple communities of interest in the homeless population, it is definitely not a one size fits all set of circumstances. And I think it's it's the desire that there is a solution, and we implement it and homelessness is gone. And I don't see it happening that way. Without substantial legislative changes statewide nationwide, and a whole new set of funding to help address those needs. There is a cost to society, a cost to our community for the current situation. So we can't say, you know, fixing it will be really expensive. I believe we will shift costs from those current impacts on society to a better solution. And when we're having conversations about members of our homeless community, I always bring to the fore thought in my mind, if this is my brother, if this is my sister, if this is my mom, how would I want them to be handled? How would I want them to be treated? And what kind of care would I hope they could receive? Even if that means they're resistant to it? But life on the streets is not sustainable? Right? I think our greatest strength is our community. We have just fantastic community members who are dedicated, who are they invest, they invest their time, their talent and their treasures here in Norman. And I think the one thing that helps make Norman really unique and special is the University of Oklahoma that sits about four blocks south of City Hall, and the economic and opportunity engine that it is, when the university made the call to move to the Southeastern Conference. I believe it was the first step in the revolution, the evolution of Norman's future, and an opportunity to improve the quality of life for everybody. new jobs, new housing opportunities, new outside dollars being invested in our community. And I hope we are positioned and skilled and aware enough to take full advantage of the opportunities that will be coming our way.

Tiffany Vrska 19:27

So as we wrap up, we definitely appreciate your time boss. Is there anything else that you'd really like listeners to know about you or your job or the city of Norman in general?

Darrel Pyle 19:38

I just recognize that we are blessed in Norman, Oklahoma, to have quality capable individuals. employed here at the city that work 24 hours a day seven days a week to keep us safe. We Yeah, we, you know are probably most well recognized in the community by most citizens. Because you know, we're out there picking up your trash can once a week and hopefully when you turn on the tap, you always receive high quality potable water, you know, in the potholes get filled as quickly as we can. Those basic services. We believe everybody kind of recognizes that as being the responsibility of the city and Norman, but there's an awful lot of planning that goes into helping Norman maintain and achieve new levels of greatness, and we will never stop that mission is ongoing and I feel blessed to be a part of it.

Tiffany Vrska 20:44

Thank you for your service and dedication. Questions or commentary about on West gray can be sent into public affairs at Norman Okay, dot give shoutouts to our producer and editor Mr. Bryce Holland of the city of Norman Communications Office, listeners are reminded that we do have a franchise election coming up for O N G, Oklahoma natural gas company on September 12 2023. The deadline to request an absentee ballot is August 28. Log on to the okay voter portal through the state election board website to view a sample ballot and more information. 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

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