

## Transcript

### **On West Gray, Episode 14, Public Transportation w/Taylor Johnson & Stephen Tyler Holman**

**Runtime: 27 minutes 28 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. Taylor Johnson, transit and parking program manager of our public works department and Mr. Stephen Tyler Holman, Ward seven council member and the City Council's community planning and transportation committee chair, they're here to discuss something near and dear to both of them today. Public transit. Gentlemen, it is great to have you with us.

Taylor Johnson 0:52

Yes, thank you for having us.

Stephen Tyler Holman 0:54

Great to be here, Tiffany.

Tiffany Vrska 0:55

Absolutely. So the last several years, we've seen quite a bit of change and new programming in terms of public transit here in Norman, between between the grants awarded and staff honors for dedication on the job, I think there's a lot to be proud of. But we have even more excitement to look forward to in the next upcoming weeks. So let's start with a bit of background Taylor, could you tell us a little bit about the city of Norman inheriting the public transit system here in our community, and what your role has been in this venture?

Taylor Johnson 1:28

Sure, I'd be happy to. So in the 2019, the city took over the city publicly funded transit side of the service that oh, you or CART had provided for 2030 years, I believe. And there was a variety of reasons for that. But basically, July one of 2019, the city began as the grantee transit service operator. And since that time, we've done a lot of work, which we'll hear about in a few minutes. But that first year, we just did a lot of maintaining, keeping the routes going. We're proud to say that we didn't miss a day of service during that time. So that's pretty exciting. And I came on right after that in August of 2019. And ever

since then, I've just been working hard to try to keep the transit system going. And so we're about to hear we're at a place where we might be able to make some changes finally, which we've been talking about for a long time.

Tiffany Vrska 2:26

That's wonderful. I know we're really lucky to have you. And um, congrats are also in order for you, Taylor, I think we should mention that you take home the Oklahoma transit Association's transit professional of the Year Award, and May, individuals selected for this award must meet or exceed certain qualifications, such as dimmest, demonstrating exemplary leadership qualities, effectively assisting their community to accomplish goals and creating collaborative partnerships. How did you feel when you learn that you had won this award?

Taylor Johnson 2:57

I was very honored. I call these group of transit professionals in our state friends and to be selected by my, my peers. And some of those that I call my friends, I just felt really happy that they were they thought of me in such high regard, I would say that this award is really showing what we've done as a city the last two or three years. A lot of what I've put in my application, or was in my application was because of the city council support and all the cool things we were able to do and start working on. So I see this as more representing what the city has been able to do. Last awesome.

Tiffany Vrska 3:33

I think it came on the heels of I think you were featured also in like a transit publication for another award. You're just a rock star around here, Taylor.

Taylor Johnson 3:44

I don't know about that. But I was honored to be in mass transit magazine's 40 under 40. And then Norman, next, our local young professional group 40 under 40. The last I can't remember the exact dates but the last couple of years. So yes,

Tiffany Vrska 3:57

thank you. Yeah. Congratulations. It's a wonderful, we're so lucky to have you. And Councilman Holman, you have an impressive tenure on the Norman city council and have been involved in so very many community projects and programs. Can you tell us a little bit about how you came to chair the cptc or the community planning and transportation committee and why public transit is something that you're so passionate about?

Stephen Tyler Holman 4:21

Yeah, absolutely. And again, I appreciate you having us and also an extend my appreciation and thank you to Taylor and the rest of the staff that have helped us get to this point. Over the last four years since we took over the system. It has been a very interesting, a fascinating journey for sure. But I've been on the council for a little over 10 years now and grew up here in Norman elementary school all the way through high school and for a period of time in my freshman into middle school early high school. I chose to ride the city bus to school over the school bus It's actually it was much more pleasant riding the bus with college kids and adults. So it was quieter it was I could do stuff and didn't have to worry about screaming kids all around and all that. So that was my first experience. I was always fascinated by public transit. When I was four years old, my dad got remarried, and we moved to Dallas for a couple years. And my stepmom worked in a skyscraper in downtown Dallas. And I remember the first time I saw a city transit bus there a dark bus, it was one of the what I call the accordion buses, where it's very long, and it looks like an accordion in the middle. And that just, I thought was so fascinating. And so that kind of really started my interest early on with public transit and buses and trains and, and things like that. And growing up in Norman, right near the railroad tracks as well. Transportation in general has always been a main interest of mine, for sure.

Tiffany Vrska 5:55

And in a community as large as ours, I think it's really important that we have reliable public transit.

Stephen Tyler Holman 6:01

Yes. And I became the community, community planning and transportation chair, I want to say in 2016, or 17, perhaps under Mayor Miller say you have a couple years under your belt. Yes. And I've been appointed to that position by mayors, Miller Clark and Mayor heikkila, currently, so three different mayor's have sought fit to appoint me to that position. I'm very thankful appreciative to them as well for that opportunity, which has given me the ability to be directly involved with our transit system in Norman, which is kind of a I don't know about a dream, but as a kid that grew up riding it, it means a lot, I think,

Tiffany Vrska 6:35

awesome. And for for new listeners, or people kind of maybe unfamiliar and with council committees, what does this committee do? How many people serve on it? When do you meet?

Stephen Tyler Holman 6:46

So we meet the fourth Thursday of every month here at City Hall at 4pm. It's a public meeting, and you're welcome to attend. It's also broadcast live on YouTube, the city, Norman's YouTube channel. And

the city council, we have four different committees really where we do most of our work and where we get regular updates from city staff about ongoing projects or initiatives that we want to take on. And so in cptc, we get a monthly report from Taylor about public transit ridership, what the numbers are updates on projects that we're working on, like the transit center, or new routes are, we talk about complaints or concerns, we've heard suggestions that public has made about what we can do differently. And we also get updates on road construction projects, sidewalk issues, pretty wide array of public transportation, infrastructure type stuff, which is, again, my like, core passion of what got me into city council stuff. Was city planning, really?

Tiffany Vrska 7:52

Sure. So those projects might come to the committee first before they're introduced to council as a whole to vote on or that,

Stephen Tyler Holman 8:00

yeah, we'll discuss the details with staff, we will make suggestions or things we'd like to see changed, will go back and forth. And then at some point, usually, we will send something forward to a full council to either approve of or not

Tiffany Vrska 8:13

wonderful. So fourth to fourth Thursday, guys tune in. And I

Taylor Johnson 8:18

think it's worth mentioning that we've been doing that transit report for forever as long as transit so I weren't cart before the city. And every month Oh, you cart would come to city council and give a report. So there was a lot of collaboration before the transition, which I think helped make the transition a little bit better counsel was aware of the routes and the ridership and the staff members like myself that were working on it beforehand. So every fourth Thursday, I encourage anybody to come that want to hear about transit

Stephen Tyler Holman 8:47

car I mentioned to the cart was my experience, always easy to work with, as far as coming to our meeting and giving us updates and being receptive to feedback. But one of the real big advantages of us the city taking over the system is that we now have, you know, the ultimate control of what we want to do with the system, any changes we want to make, we have the ability to make them on our own terms. And

Tiffany Vrska 9:10

we have all that institutional knowledge from Taylor insight. So hopping back over to you, Taylor, can you tell us about the new route transit changes that we're hearing about and when those will be put into place? I'm wondering if this coincides with the new transit center opening soon.

Taylor Johnson 9:28

Yeah, it does coincide with the new transit center opening. We're looking at October 16 for the transit center at 320. East Comanche what we call the old Chase Bank building. We're remodeling right now. It looks really good. We made a lot of progress. And with that opening of this of the center, the routes will change which is a pretty significant modification of routes for community our size. Each route will be adjusted in some way. And bus stops. Some bus stops will go away that are currently being used in Some bus stops will be added about a wash, actually 50 will go away and 50 will come online. And we're working on those changes right now as well. The round that

Tiffany Vrska 10:10

was a long term process that was led through citizen input. Correct.

Taylor Johnson 10:15

Thank you for mentioning that. So back in 2020. But less than a year after we took over the transit service, we issued an RFP for a consultant to come in and help us redo or really make a transit long range plan for the city of Norman, based on the routes that we had inherited in the system that we had through the course of fiscal year 21. We worked through that had community meetings, the consultant took all that feedback of historical ridership and everything bus stop level granular data. And we presented to council a go norm and transit plan. And that was unanimously adopted by council in June of 2021. And since then, we worked on okay, how do we start implementing that and the first phase was really this fundamental route network change. And this is meant to be budget neutral, we didn't want to go to council and say, Hey, we need to make changes, but we need \$3 million right off the bat, right? So that never goes over? Well. So this will be pretty much budget neutral with the funds that we have in the vehicles and the staff we have, how can we make the system better. And that includes making routes, more bi directional. So what that means is they're going to go out from the transit center, do their route, and then turn around at some point and come back the same direction. And for the user, that's really important because you can get off at a destination, cross do your business, cross the street and catch the bus going back. So you don't have to ride the entire route like you do now on a loop to get back to where you came from. And then, like I said, some more bus new bus stop locations and and then the transit center. I think that's really important. We've talked about more modern amenities at the at a transit hub for years, we'll have public drinking fountain with a water bottle filler will have restrooms for staff and for the public will have indoor waiting area. So you can escape the heat or the cold depending

on the season, and will also have outdoor seating as well. So we're really excited about all those changes coming for the routes.

Tiffany Vrska 12:17

Yes. And public information on that will be coming out very soon. So frequent Norman ok.gov, for that. So the new transit changes that's more in the sphere of like our traditional embarked public transportation or city buses. But the city council also approved just last year, a micro transit system that's more of an on call type of program, such as Uber or Lyft. And our organization partnered with ODU to make this pilot program happen recently. So as a voting member of the body who approved this type of program program, can you speak to its launch, Councilman Holman, and how you feel the community may benefit from the service?

Stephen Tyler Holman 12:58

Absolutely, I appreciate you asking. It's the on demand. Service is really born out of a two things I would say primarily one to address the last mile or gaps in our fixed route bus system, where it may not go but places that people do need to go. And also that our we've heard for many years about how none of the private rideshare companies in Norman that operate in Norman offer, Ada services, accessibility vehicles. And so that was one of the things we'd heard is that our current system, paratransit is a 24 hour at least sign up and schedule your ride. We've heard a lot from a lot of our residents in the ADA community about how much they would like the ability to come and go as they please, on demand, I guess. And so those two things, trying to fill the gaps in our fixed route bus system and then help our residents with ADA access issues have more mobility, freedom to get around the city when they need to, and not having to schedule a day in advance or things like that. And so that's what it really came out of. And I think I've heard very positive feedback so far from some that have used it outside of the hours, which, again, this being a pilot program, we're trying to figure out how this might work best in Norman, as far as people actually using it. I've heard very positive feedback so far.

Tiffany Vrska 14:31

Awesome. I think that you've also heard some pretty positive feedback, right, Taylor?

Taylor Johnson 14:36

Yeah. So looking at the reviews through vias dashboard that we have access to mostly the reviews are five stars, so that's really good. There's always going to be a few that are not going to be as high but by and large, the majority are five stars. And I think it's worth mentioning the exact characteristics of the service. So as councilmember Holman mentioned, we weren't able to do it. Maybe everything that everybody thought they would want for an on demand service. But to try to complement our fixed route bus service, we did late night service Monday through Saturday, and then daytime service on Sundays. And that extends our hours of public transit offerings. We don't go as late as the on demand service

does with our fixed route service or paratransit. And then on Sundays, we don't have any service at all with fixed routes. So this is really a good way of testing out those markets are those times I would say, and we can always expand the on demand service or expand the bus service. This will really give us some data to see what the community needs and what they want in terms of transit service. And it's all about options, right? We have the bus we have on demand, we have paratransit, we have scooters, all these different things that people could use to get around. And we just want to provide as many of those options that can fit people's walks of life as possible.

Tiffany Vrska 15:56

Sure, and I heard that the first six rides for anybody completely free, right?

Taylor Johnson 16:01

That's right. So if you make a login, your first six trips will be free. And then it'll be \$2 per trip after that. And if you have a friend going with you or a couple friends, you can add those in on the app and those will be \$1 Extra so they can ride with you if there's enough seats available on the vehicle

Tiffany Vrska 16:16

and free for you students as part of the Safe Ride partnership, right?

Taylor Johnson 16:22

Yeah, so great partnership with the University of Oklahoma, and specifically the student affairs office. They provided a historic, Safe Ride program for probably 20 years, I think. And that was always Thursday, Friday, Saturday, late night. If you need a ride home for any reason, no questions asked, please use this service to take a ride home on us. So I was able to connect with them and council approved an agreement and Oh, you did to bolster the micro transit service that we got to extend the Thursday, Friday, Saturday hours to 3am. And then students will ride free during those Safe Ride hours, which is historically been 10pm to 3am. Thursday, Friday, Saturday.

Tiffany Vrska 17:05

Awesome. Well, I can't wait to try it out. I have not yet. But I will be doing so in the near future. And so very exciting. And lastly, Taylor, can you give us an update on the RTA or the Regional Transportation Authority news here in Central Oklahoma. I know there had been talks about getting kind of a regional transit program in place for folks to get to and from places around the metro. Yeah,

Taylor Johnson 17:29

if it's okay, I'd like to defer to Councilmember Holman who has been involved with these talks for 15 years or 10 years. So you want to give us a little background on that.

Stephen Tyler Holman 17:38

Yeah, happy to I first my first involvement with the idea of regional transit, a solution was probably around 2007 or eight with the ontrack group as it was called back then. And they probably started in the early 2000s 2003 or four perhaps exploring this idea of connecting the Oklahoma City metro area through a single transit system instead of Oklahoma City having their own bus system and Edmond has their own in Norman has one more Midwest City and Dale City and Yukon don't have one at all. And so and then the rail component of connecting Norman to Edmond, the airport Tinker Air Force Base, with downtown Oklahoma City as a central hub is something that partner city has been working for for several years. I think the first agreement we signed may have been in 2014 or 15, with Mayor Rosenthal, and the mayors of Moore, Oklahoma City, Edmond, Midwest City and del city at the time, and formed a working group, the city's contributed funding towards the exploration of it. And then a few years ago appointed, each city appointed a board representative to create a Regional Transit Authority. And then each member city was able to appoint resident members to represent the respective cities on those, the chair of the RTA board has been former governor Brad Henry. So that's really helped, I think, get a lot of momentum on the political side of it, public Biden of it, having someone with that profile in that position. And so it's been a lot of fun exploring it. I have someone that is, again, having lived in Dallas a little bit when I was a kid, they had the dark train. And then there's the Trinity Express, which connects downtown Dallas and downtown Fort Worth. And then we have, of course, the heartland flyer, which resumed operation when I was in middle school here in Norman. It had been out of operation for a couple, maybe couple of decades, was brought back into service and maybe 98 or 99. And so that service running from downtown Oklahoma City to Fort Worth every day, twice a day. And just kind of building off of that has been really exciting. to explore.

Tiffany Vrska 20:01

So those the connectivity plans are very still much in progress are still in progress as far as like, you know, working with other cities and getting that accomplished.

Taylor Johnson 20:13

Right. So I tend every monthly RTA board meeting just to stay connected. The RTA has made a lot of progress since being officially formed in 2019. I think that was a big shift in the working groups to an actual authority elected or not elected body, but a body that has, you know, they're there they have authority they can do their subjects open meetings. City, yeah. So they, they can make decisions, make recommendations, they're, they're poised to do that. So there's been a lot of work since 2019, they passed a transit system plan for the the metro. And since that time, they've been working on Alternatives Analysis, which there's a lot of binocular with the FT, the Federal Transit Administration, and how you go through the process of creating routes and ultimately getting grants for those routes.



But basically, we're looking at commuter rail between Norman, Oklahoma City and Edmond and then a bus rapid transit route out to Tinker Air Force Base, which bus rapid transit is using those accordion buses are articulated buses, kind of like a streetcar on wheels with elevated platforms. very frequent service. So it's not a bus, it's it's a higher level service. To get out to our major employees.

Stephen Tyler Holman 21:24

There's one in the Northwest Express rate express way is, I think, the first rat bus rapid transit line in Oklahoma City that's operating now. I think it's coming

Taylor Johnson 21:34

online in later this Okay, yeah, they're working on it. So that's what they're working on working on the numbers working with BNSF as a major partner, obviously, using the rail corridor, they're finalizing all that, and ultimately will have to go to the people to see how we're going to build this thing. So that should be coming in the next couple of years.

Stephen Tyler Holman 21:53

And that's an important thing to note too, is that using the existing rail right of way, so we're not trying to build a light rail system, which would require a whole new rail line to build a property acquisition, all that type stuff where we've been, the discussion has always been about the existing rail line between Norman and Edmond. And throughout the metro area, and utilizing that in a partnership with BNSF railroad.

Tiffany Vrska 22:18

All right, well, I hope that comes to fruition. I come from a smaller city, and I'm still not used to the traffic. So I would love to just hop on a train and guess where I'm going. And there's

Taylor Johnson 22:28

in there studying, I think councilmember Holman mentioned the airport, Will Rogers world airport, they're studying align to go out to Will Rogers to and it's, we'll see if that's in the first phase or not, but they're looking at that. So lots of exciting transit. And I just want to echo the Amtrak, Amtrak is actually looking at expanding, or we're hoping we're petitioning them to expand the heartland flyer service and frequency, but also go up to Newton, Kansas, to extend that line. So we can connect with the Southwest chief, which goes from Chicago to La Wow. So there'll be that connection from Newton, Kansas down to Dallas Fort Worth, and with Oklahoma City metro in between. So we're trying to get that that used to be a route all the way up to Newton, Kansas. And we're, we're working hard with a coalition of others to try to get that back online. That's

Stephen Tyler Holman 23:13

part of the maybe frustrating part about the idea of rail based transit is that we're trying to rebuild or put back what we once already had in the United States. And even the metro, we had an inter urban rail system that connected Norman's Edmond and El Reno, actually, I think, Norman to Guthrie, El Reno. And so, trying to put back a sewer system in service that we already once had, is a little bit frustrating because of the cost of it. But it is exciting. And I'm really looking forward to that, just as Taylor mentioned right now, to go to Chicago, on a train, you'd have to go south to Dallas, and then go east and then go back up north. And so that's not very efficient. And then just imagining things like being able to, if you live in Edmond, and you want to come down to know your football game. You don't have to drive to Norman and park and be in traffic and be stuck. Wouldn't that be you can ride the train down, get off, go enjoy yourself and whenever you're ready to leave the train will take you back. Or, you know, Sunday, hopefully Oklahoma City and Tulsa being connected by a rail. I mean, imagine being able to get from Oak downtown OKC to Downtown Tulsa in 40 minutes.

Tiffany Vrska 24:25

All right. I'm looking forward to it. You guys have to make it happen now. You already told her listeners so. Well, thank you both so much for being here with us today. Is there anything else that you would like to share?

Taylor Johnson 24:35

Oh, I really appreciate you inviting us on Tiffany. And we're really looking forward to the opening of the new transit center again located at 320 East Comanche, Comanche and again opening on October 16. If you're listening, please make sure to download the Norman on demand app on your smart device and access your first six trips for free in core Norman. And then as Tiffany said earlier, just keep checking the web Beside Norman ok.gov, for any updates and news regarding public transportation, all right,

Tiffany Vrska 25:05

well, thank you, Taylor. Thank you, Councilman Holman. We appreciate your time.

Stephen Tyler Holman 25:09

Yeah, absolutely. If I may mention just one thing. I don't know if we mentioned that our system our bus system is free, fair. And we're one of the only systems I think in the country that offers that's that free fair. And that thanks to Norman voters in 2019, after we took over the system, they approved a dedicated sales tax funding source for public transit in Norman. I think we became the first and maybe only city in Oklahoma to have a voter approved dedicated funding source for public transit. So it just

passed by over 70%. And just show that Norman residents really do care a lot about this subject and want more of it, I think,

Taylor Johnson 25:50

yeah. And as councilmember Holman said, the bus system is free. So no risk, try out the bus. If you need somebody to come with you, I'm always happy to do so feel free to reach out. I tell people all that time you want to try to ride the bus let me know and I'll I'll take you on a ride.

Tiffany Vrska 26:06

Awesome. And we I think we'll be seeing you all soon over in public works the Citizens Academy that I teach and hopefully they'll be able to enjoy a quick bus ride to get acquainted with that. I know you did it last year and it was awesome. They really enjoyed that. So questions or commentary about on West gray can be sent into public affairs at [Norman.ok.gov](http://Norman.ok.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 special election concerning a bridge maintenance program on October 10. The city of Norman is solely responsible for the maintenance of 80 bridges and 300 culvert crossings across our community. Learn more see frequently asked questions or review ballot language at [Norman.ok.gov/bridge](http://Norman.ok.gov/bridge) by bridge. Until next time, stay engaged. Stay informed and always remember to cast your ballot. I'm Tiffany Vrska. Thank you for joining us On West Gray

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