

Transcript

On West Gray, Episode 17, Information Technology w/Tim Powers

Runtime: 15 minutes

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 in the studio with us. We have information technology director, Tim Powers, who is here to share information about his department, as well as tips and reminders regarding cybersecurity for our community, a hot topic for sure, Tim, thanks for being with us. And welcome to the show activity. Thank you glad to be on. Absolutely. So the Information Technology Department at the city of Norman, much like communications touches every other department at our organization. As more and more services become based in technology in some way, the roles and responsibilities of your team are constantly evolving and expanding. So we're going to chat about some of that today. So first off, how many folks are on your team? And what are the primary areas of focus for it at the city of Norman? Well, including myself, there are 17 of us in the IT department. And basically

Tim Powers 1:21

the IT department is split into two distinct groups, hardware and software. So on the hardware side of the house, you have network infrastructure security, you also have the help desk over there. And you have any type of storage and data retention over there. And then on the software side of the house or business systems support is over there. Print Shop and web development, app development as well. And I have to give a shout out to the help desk because I think I hit them up about 12 times a day and they are on it, man. They're a popular group, they're the best. So how long have you been with the city and what does a day as the IT director look like? Well, I started back in 2014, in March of 2014, so I'm coming up on 10 years of service now.

And so my days will vary. It depends on it. Of course, if there's emergencies, I'll get engaged in those quite heavily and in support of both of the IT managers. Typically, I will be doing research on my end, I talk a lot to my business peers outside of the outside of the city. And then I talk a lot inside the house to just my peers inside all the other department heads to make sure that we're supporting them properly. I do a lot of research, for the budget in the upcoming years, new technologies, what we're going to be spending, and then I do a lot of in depth research and on cybersecurity attacks that are happening nationwide and worldwide so that we're prepared for those things. And that we're trying to make sure and do our due diligence to keep keep up with the way we should be protecting our data on site.

Tiffany Vrska 3:14

Yes, I always appreciate the quick scares that we get in the management team meetings about what's going on in the IT world. But it's really important that people are aware of that so that we can protect ourselves and you guys do a phenomenal job. So what would you say the greatest differences and IT development from maybe the time you started until now are?

Tim Powers 3:35

What I would say to that is that, you know, we've definitely grown. We've been fortunate to get some more budget in technology as we've expanded what we're offering technology wise to the city. And we're also I think a little bit more engaged in public needs. And we have beefed up our policies. And so we do those annually. We look at those, and we make sure that our policies are good, and they're following, you know, the needs of our business partners inside the city and outside. And then I would just say that we're also better prepared these days in the area of cybersecurity.

Tiffany Vrska 4:16

Yeah, it's really interesting, because 1020 30 years ago, emergency preparedness and emergency operations looked a lot different than they do today. Today, you're thinking about, as you said, cybersecurity, and what can happen in the tech world. And that is just incredibly interesting. And I thank your team for being on the front edge of of all that that entails so that we can be prepared. And so would you say that most of the work that your team does is internal facing or external? And how do you stay cognizant of kind of both sides of that wheel taking care of our staff needs and then also ensuring a solid digital foundation for the residents that we're serving the bulk

Tim Powers 4:59

of our work work isn't supported the business systems that are, you know, operating the city, namely financial systems, the utility billing, even public safety. So we spend a lot of time in supporting those things the network is, is in place to support those things as well. But when it comes to those systems, and also security, we're we're kind of balanced between external and internal faced, because we're always looking out for the citizens data. And we're also looking out for our internal protection of the data. And then also what types of technology we use to offer more convenient ways for the citizens to interact with us, we're looking at that quite a bit too. Right.

Tiffany Vrska 5:43

And we just had the launch of City View, which I think is a pretty good example of that. So a lot of, you know, obtaining permits or certain types of licenses, you can now do that digitally, like anywhere, right? Yes,

Tim Powers 5:57

what yeah, we're going to be hopefully coming to the public with some new ways to make payments, maybe you'll be able to go to 711 and make your your utility bill payment. CityView is also allowing folks to be able to look at their permitting, and their planning documents online and submit everything digitally now, as opposed to having to do everything paper wise. So that's going to be I think, very helpful coming up in the future.

Tiffany Vrska 6:29

That is awesome. That is so exciting. So something as we touched on, something we discuss within our team quite a bit is cybersecurity. So staff has regular trainings, where awareness and we receive information about things to be on the lookout for, and how to be best protected. So to that end, what what might you share with the general community on this topic?

Tim Powers 6:51

Well, when I started back in the early 2000s, now on this career path, I'd never thought I would spend as much time as I do. on cybersecurity, it wasn't really even, you know, heavily discussed back in those days. But we spend a lot of time on that internally, we prepare layers of defense for ourselves, to protect the network and the data within it. But also we've seen you know, the public get, you know, attacks, you know, yourself you get emails, phone calls, text messages that are just from scammers, and it almost seems like you get more don't

Tiffany Vrska 7:29

forget those direct messages on social media. And I just love coming across those. Yeah,

Tim Powers 7:36

those things will get you to, and when I would, what I always tell people, I tell my family this and I tell my co workers this all the time is be very careful these days, especially when you get any type of communication. If it's unexpected. If it's asking for personal information, if it's urgent, or if they're trying to prey on your emotions. Or you know, if it if it feels too good to be true, you should probably figure out a way to contact your you know, if that's coming from your bank, if it's posed as your bank, figure out a good way to contact your bank by phone and make sure that you're not dealing with the scammer. Right,

Tiffany Vrska 8:20

right. And we try to put out regular PSAs about that. And unfortunately, they just keep coming. So kinda reminder that if you feel like you've been a victim of a scam that you should contact your Norman Police Department. Yes. So what's on the horizon for it in the future? Although you fly under the radar, most of the time, the projects and initiatives that you all are involved in are very crucial to the success of our everyday business. So what can staff or the community be on the lookout for? Well,

Tim Powers 8:51

like you mentioned, just before, we've just completed a journey that we started back in 2018 have an overhaul of all of our business systems. So our financial system, our utility, billing, all the parks and rec systems, and like you mentioned a bit ago, city view for Planning and Community Development. Those things all have to be learned intimately by the staff, by our support staff, and also the people that use them on a daily basis. And then they have to kind of pass that knowledge down to the public. So that takes a little bit of time. So we'll be we'll be helping with those efforts and training for those efforts. And then as we see progression there, we'll start enhancing those services. Like I said before, we don't offer a way to go to a convenience store to make bill payments right now. But once we get those things, kind of all the bugs worked out of those things will we'll make that available. And we're also looking at something that will make it easier for the public when they come in to make any type of payment in At Central cashiering, so that you can go to one place, and you can buy a garage sale permit, pay your utility bill, all at one stop so that you're not having to bounce around the city all over the place.

Tiffany Vrska 10:13

The convenience of technology, you have to love it.

Tim Powers 10:15

Right? Yes. And the and the scare of it too?

Tiffany Vrska 10:20

Well, I have to I do have to ask you one more question. I think that you mentioned this a little bit earlier. On the show, you talked about storage bins and stuff like that. So we're unique in that, you know, we have to abide by open records laws and that sort of thing. From the IT standpoint. What is that? Like? I mean, I know that the City Clerk's Office has, you know, every book that began since the history of the city of Norman, but as you know, the the business community transitioned to be more tech based, and now everybody has a computer they do work on and things like that. I mean, from the aspect of storage, just everything that we have to keep as a municipality, what kind of challenge is that? Like? And how do you tackle that?

Tim Powers 11:06

Well, that's tough. That's one of the ones that we talk about a lot, especially when it comes to our budget, because storage is expensive. We have, you know, as you can imagine, we've got all of those types of records, we've got legal records, police cases, video documents of badge cam,

Tiffany Vrska 11:24

we have plans that are way too big to even print out for people, they take entire, you know,

Tim Powers 11:30

maps, all of these things. And then we have, we have a really bulky backup and storage, retention effort that we go through. So that's, you know, that's coming up in the future, that's something that we're looking towards a little bit of help from the cloud, that's a little bit scary for us. Because, you know, when you have it on premises, you have yourself to blame, if it's not secure enough. When it's up in the cloud, you're having to rely on other locations and various vendors to make sure that they're, they're handling their business properly, and making sure those things are secure for storage. And you're also having to worry if, if they're a bigger target than maybe the city would be, because if people can hack, a large storage, offering, like Google or Microsoft, or Amazon offers, they've got a lot of data there. And so we have to balance that when we're making those decisions. And we talk a lot about that. So that that's, that's a challenge that we try to do our best to overcome.

Tiffany Vrska 12:37

All right, no pressure, Tim, was there anything else that you'd like to share with the listeners about your department or what you do day to day?

Tim Powers 12:47

Oh, you know, I would just say, even though we fly under the radar, we do touch every bit of business here. But it's, I've been very fortunate in that I have the ability to work with some true professionals where I'm at, they know their stuff. So the the folks that are out there listening can rest assured that these folks know what they're doing. And they also are looking through the lens of what are the tax payers having to pay for here, or making sure that we're doing our due diligence there. And that we're we're protecting data with with the best security that we can. And, you know, like I said, it's it's difficult for people to see us but we truly care about what's going on out there. And we've got people on the inside that are that are looking out for the community. Awesome.

Tiffany Vrska 13:41

Well, we definitely appreciate working with your team every day, you do a phenomenal job. Well, thanks so much for joining us today. Tim, we appreciate your time and the vital services that you

provide to our staff and the residents we serve. Thank you very much. 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 city council elections for awards 246 and eight will be coming up on February 13. The deadline to register to vote in those races is January 19. Learn more and view candidates running for office at Norman ok.gov. Follow us on social Facebook, Twitter and YouTube city of Norman Okay, and Instagram the city of Norman. 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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