

Transcript

On West Gray, Episode 18, The City Clerk Office w/Brenda Hall

Runtime: 17 minutes

Tiffany Vrska 0:18

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 joining us On West Gray. Today in the studio, we have with us Mrs. Brenda Hall, city clerk for the city of Norman. Brenda has an impressive tenure here at the city and her office acts as the official record keepers for the city, among many other things. Brenda, welcome to the show.

Brenda Hall 0:46

Thank you. Thanks for having me, Tiffany.

Tiffany Vrska 0:48

Absolutely. So you and your team are really the heartbeat of the city in so many ways. You keep safe and tidy all of our city records do you function as a one stop shop, also overseeing the city's Action Center, you make sure that we're abiding by the Open Meetings Act, and so so much more. So we'd like to tell our listeners a little bit more about all of the unsung heroes in your office and all of the people that helped to make that happen. So first off, how long have you been with the city of Norman?

Brenda Hall 1:16

over 34 years, we'll be 35 this summer. So

Tiffany Vrska 1:20

you must really love your job.

Brenda Hall 1:22

I do like my job.

Tiffany Vrska 1:24

That's a long time. And that's something to be proud of. So how would you describe your role of the city clerk? Like what is your day to day look like?

Brenda Hall 1:33

Well, each day is different, certainly. But the the main role of the city clerk is, as you stated, the official records keeper for the city and also the official keeper of the seal. But it's often referred to in other municipal governments as the hub of local government. And there's a couple of reasons for that. The most of the things that happen here at the city, that council takes action on or that the citizens want us to do moving forward some point in time funnels to my office. And so the city clerk really kind of acts as the conduit between city staff, the public and city council. That's about the best way I can describe it. Okay, in

Tiffany Vrska 2:18

the so you mentioned keeper of the seal. So is that the fancy stamp that goes on all the official records?

Brenda Hall 2:25

That is the fancy stamp? That's

Tiffany Vrska 2:28

awesome. So how have you seen the organization grow or change during your time on here at Norman?

Brenda Hall 2:35

Well, there's certainly been a lot of changes in the 34 years I've been here. Certainly our staff has grown around the city, not in my department, I still have the same number of staff that we did when I started the but probably the difference I could say is that everything is just faster. And I think that's technology driven. When I first started, we did the council agendas on a typewriter, and we cut and pasted actual pieces of paper to fill the page out. And that's how the agenda books were done. We certainly we didn't have email, there were no personal computers. I know I'm really aging myself now. But that's how it was when I started here. And of course, now everything is in an instant. We all have email, we have texts, and we were able to do our agendas automated, which makes everything easier. But the pace is still faster, much faster than it was 30 years ago. And I I just think that's a testament to where we're at in this world right now with technology and expectation. public expectation.

Tiffany Vrska 3:45

Sure. Now, you mentioned the the typewriter bid. So we recently had some renovations here at City Hall to include our suite here and communications is brand new. And then there was some work done to where you all office that there with the with the city manager and your team. So tell me a little bit about the the old record books that you bring like to Citizens Academy when we put that program on and how they're protected and how they're organized. Because, again, I just don't think that people really understand how much responsibility and how vast sort of a storage keep that you have to oversee.

Brenda Hall 4:23

That's very fair statement. We do have records all the way back to 1898. Wow. When the city was created, we have the books you are referring to. We have our minutes and our city ordinances in these large bound leather books. And we have those all the way back to the very beginning until 1898. A lot of the minutes back early on. We're all handwritten. So they're very interesting to look at and just to read I mean a lot of the ordinances that happen, then you know where something is funny is not are driving your wagon down Main Street with a milk cart open. So they're very, very interesting. And it is, you mentioned that it's, it's important. And it really is important because this is our history. And one of the renovations that we did in my office was to fireproof, that room that had has all of those really, really old books in it, something that's kind of been weighing on me for years, honestly, that if we ever did have a fire that would be lost forever. I mean, a lot of it is microfilm, or scanned. But a lot of those really, really old records are too fragile to do that with so the importance of keeping them for not only our historical purposes, but statutory purposes are, are important as well. So citizens, we come in all the time asking that are doing research projects, and we've had a couple of people that were writing papers at the university and on history, and they would just come in and sit and read through those minutes books, which was really interesting. There's a lot that they learned as well. So there's just a lot of information back there. That's

Tiffany Vrska 6:11

awesome. And this may kind of tie in to the next question I was going to ask about the Action Center. Could you tell us a little bit about the Action Center? I mean, people kind of go there for lots of different things, even possibly, including records requests, but tell us about that. And then how many inquiries, you know, your your team fields, maybe per day or per week or per year? I mean, you all stay busy back there?

Brenda Hall 6:39

We certainly do. The Action Center was created in 1999. I can still remember it to this very day, former Mayor Bob Thompson, it was something that he created as a way to have our citizens have a one stop shop, as you mentioned earlier, that a number that they could contact the city regardless of what the question was, or the need, and they would be able to get information without having to be transferred four or five different times. And so over the years, it is increased over time, when we get a request or an

inquiry. Our goal is a 24 hour turnaround. Now, that doesn't mean the issue will be resolved in 24 hours, but we at least get back to the party that submitted it and we take them via our website, also voicemail or you can walk in or call I mean, we can get them all kinds of ways. But the biggest issue, or the biggest thing we're trying to achieve is getting information to the citizens in a timely fashion. It only functions well, because we have the help of all the other departments in the city. They are the ones oftentimes that we're getting the information from. And so it has been a success. I think there are a lot of people, if you asked him, Have you ever heard of the Action Center, they know exactly what it is. And we do have regular callers that call daily or weekly or so forth on these different issues. So so

Tiffany Vrska 8:08

how many folks are on your team, they're in the clerk's office,

Brenda Hall 8:12

there's six of us, including myself, we have in our file area, or what we call central files. That is where the Action Center is answered. And so I have two employees in that area one is picks up on the Action Center and is in charge of processing that it's really more of a team effort, because they all have to do it at honestly. But one of the persons their job is basically coding for purposes of archiving. Every document that comes through our office, every city council agenda, every item that's on the agenda is filed and criss crossed by subject matter, just so that if you went to look something up, you wouldn't have to know the exact contract number or you could know maybe what the project was or who the contractor was, and we would have a way to find it. So that coding that she's doing is on the documents themselves. So that takes quite a bit of time. Just processing all of that. The second person actually does the filing of all the documents after they're coded and is also backup on the Action Center and any archival stuff more we're scanning and getting things actually in the digital form. She takes care of that as well. So I have an administrative assistant who is also my license administrator. We issue business licenses here at the city, not for every business but for certain specific types. And my administrative assistant is in charge of that as well as typing minutes from various council committees and city council meetings. She wears many hats as well. And just like all of us do in the department I have a deputy city clerk who is responsible for creating the City Council agendas and doing those minutes. That is pretty much a full time job just by process of how everything happens, people, somebody's always continuously working on submitting an item before City Council for some type of approval. And so we have that in a software program that she's constantly monitoring and updating things and correcting things as they process through so that we can actually get them on an agenda. She also is my right arm, she wears lots of hats as well, she has to fill in for me if I'm out of the office. And so we we are a team, we're definitely a team in the city clerk's office. And we only function well, because we do function as a team. Right,

Tiffany Vrska 10:47

and the agendas that you mentioned to it's not absolutely crazy for those to be upward of 300 pages. Sometimes I'll have a meeting, right?

Brenda Hall 10:55

I mean, we've had several recently that we're closer to 1000 pages. So it's a lot of documentation and information. And our goal is to get it to council on a timely enough manner that they have time to review it prior to having to take any action on it the following week. I gotcha.

Tiffany Vrska 11:13

So as far as fielding requests from from citizens, like via the Action Center, or what have you, you'll have to forgive me because I did have these numbers at one time. But do you have like an average number of what you what you feel what you tend to in your office,

Brenda Hall 11:30

I think as far as the Action Center goes, that is documented. Most of the other end records requests are documented as well, those actually come through me. But the Action Center probably averages about 30 calls a week that ebbs and flows based on what's going on in the community, we have an annual garage sale here at Norman. And of course, when that's happening, that really that activity speeds up if we're having an election or anything like that that's that's communities focused on the volume picks up in the Action Center as people are reaching out for information,

Tiffany Vrska 12:03

right. And that leads into a question that I did have for you as well. And since we do have an election coming up here in February, what is the role of the city clerk's office in municipal elections?

Brenda Hall 12:16

There's a couple of things. I mean, the city clerk is the official custodian of those campaign forms as well. And that's under state statute, they file for candidacy over at the election board, but then they come back to our office and file all of their campaign reports, and so on and so forth. So, technically, my official capacity is to keep those reports on file for four years, and to upload those to our website so the public can get to them to see who's contributing to whose campaign and just the information is out there. We go a little above and beyond here in Norman, we have a normal Election Commission, which is a local election commission, the only city in the state that does this. And they actually review the campaign reports that are received, just to make sure all the information is accurate, or they're not missing information. And it's it's not about it's just about compliance. So if they see there's something incomplete or whatever, it'll be returned to the candidate to be corrected. And as also a part of that

commissions. One of their goals is to educate the public on the election process. And so, as a part of doing that, we offer a candidate orientation each year, that the chair of the commission and I co present, it basically goes over all the rules that they have to follow for elections, our local sign ordinance rules and things of that nature. And just three years ago, we added even a second educational component to that. We hold that actually, we'll be hosting one Wednesday night of this week, a campaign workshop, campaign reporting workshop where we will actually go through each form and help them with questions about how you report certain things or what needs to be reported and what doesn't and helps you just take that piece out of the way and they can focus on other things so

Tiffany Vrska 14:12

wonderful, and that that next election for us will be February 13. And we will be casting ballots for even numbered wards for the city council's 246 and eight. So Brenda, what do you think the very best part of your job is? It seems like you have a lot on your plate. So what do you enjoy the very most?

Brenda Hall 14:33

I think probably one thing that I can say consistently is that I've always taken pride in the fact that I have a local component to my community. And so some a lot of the things that we see happen as we grow and projects go forth. I feel like I have an invested piece of that because I was involved at some point in some minor way even but it seems that you just have more a sense of community and that you're actually a part of making your community great. So my

Tiffany Vrska 15:08

favorite part about your job is that I feel like you know everything I say Brenda is the knower of all things. So if I ever have questions, I definitely am going to you first. Or Catherine or Darrell, but mostly you first so I appreciate all that you all do and the many hats that you wear. Is there anything further that you'd like to share with our listeners about the city clerk's office here in Norman,

Brenda Hall 15:33

I think we probably covered most everything. I just want the citizens to know that not only my employees, but certainly the clerk's office works very hard and very diligent to take care of the things that they're responsible for. And they do so in such a kind manner. So I'm very proud of that. Absolutely.

Tiffany Vrska 15:53

Questions or comments about On West gray can be sent into PublicAffairs@NormanOK.gov shoutouts to our producer and editor Mr. Bryce Holland of the city of Norman communications office. Remember that election is coming up on February 13 2023. Learn more at NormanOK.gov. Follow us on social

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Normanok.gov/norman-news To enroll in email notifications for city PSAs traffic advisories and more.
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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