

Transcript

On West Gray, Episode 19, The Division of Environmental Resilience & Sustainability w/Michele Loudenback

Runtime: 21 minutes 22 Seconds

Tiffany Vrska 0:15

What's up everybody? Welcome to on West spray 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 Michele Loudenback, manager of the city of Norman's Division of Environmental resilience and sustainability, also known as the doers. She is here today to talk to us about the division, all of the work that they do, maintaining and protecting Norman's environmental resources and their new one Water Initiative. Michelle, welcome to the show.

Michele Loudenback 0:48

Thanks, Tiffany. I'm glad to be here.

Tiffany Vrska 0:50

Absolutely. So let's jump in here. So tell us about the doers. And when this division officially came to be?

Michele Loudenback 0:58

Well, I'm glad you asked. As you mentioned, doers means the Division of Environmental resilience and sustainability. But we wanted a good acronym to describe how we are and we are doers. We work out in the field, we're trying to protect the environment. And we're also trying to educate the public. So I felt like it fit. And it came into being in April of 23. So we're pretty fresh. We're coming up on a year pretty excited because it ties in with the green Norman eco month. And you know how much I love that.

Tiffany Vrska 1:28

Yes. So how many folks are on your team?

Michele Loudenback 1:31

We currently have eight. That's right, just eight of us to do all of the programs that we have. And there are many, many programs. Well, yeah,

Tiffany Vrska 1:39

tell us a little bit about some of those programs and projects that you have in your division. Thank

Michele Loudenback 1:45

you for asking. I will start by saying that originally, we were called Environmental Services. And we were more of a support division to other permitted DEQ types of things like the wastewater treatment plant, or the water treatment facility, those kinds of things, we have evolved. And now not only do we have the things that environmental services had, which are the industrial pretreatment program, which helps protect our infrastructure and our employees, the fats, oil and grease program, which keeps those things out of the sewer system. So we don't have those nasty overflows. We also have the household hazardous waste facility, which I hope everyone has had an opportunity to check out. But if you haven't, please go online, make an appointment, call talk to us come out and see it because it's an amazing facility. And the coordinator is just amazing. I agree. We also have stormwater quality now. So that's part of the addition to our group. Stormwater quality focuses primarily on protecting our watersheds, and our water resources. It's important that people know that whatever we do on the ground actually affects everything else in our environment. everything is interrelated. And we can talk about that a little bit more with the one water. On top of those direct programs. We also are responsible for the resilience and sustainability piece of education and activities within the city. So what does that mean? Well, I'm glad you asked. What it means is were responsible for the solar farms at the water treatment plant and the water reclamation facility.

Tiffany Vrska 3:30

Do you hear that guys? We have solar farms here. Pretty awesome. It's

Michele Loudenback 3:34

super awesome. And I would love to show people so absolutely give us a call, we'll do a tour. We have things like nature based solutions that we want to put in on different types of construction projects, nature based solutions are ways that we can develop areas, the way nature would do it. I know that sounds a little bit weird. But traditionally, if we look at infrastructure, it's gray, concrete and curbs and gutters and that kind of thing. And when I say nature based solutions, what I mean are, instead of going with concrete and asphalt, we put in more vegetative things where water can infiltrate, slow down, soak in and spread out that kind of thing.

Tiffany Vrska 4:18

Going from gray to green,

Michele Loudenback 4:19

right, a green. That's it.

Tiffany Vrska 4:22

All right, hashtag green Norman. So you mentioned the one Water Initiative. So tell me a little bit about that. I know that I've heard you mention it in some public meetings, the idea that you know, the water that we have today is all the water we'll ever have. So talk a little bit about that and what that means.

Michele Loudenback 4:41

I'm glad you brought that up. It's really important and I You're right, I've been beating that drum for years. And I'm glad that we're finally coming around the entire country actually the entire world is coming to this one water concept. And the reason that it is so important is because typically, we separate water into different kinds categories. So we might have wastewater, or we might have storm water, or we might have drinking water. And we might have industrial wastewater, those kinds of things, when in fact, there is no separate kind of water, it is only one water. Yes, there's waste in the water. But that's why we have a water reclamation facility, we're reclaiming the water, removing the waste and reclaiming that water. As you know, every time in any wastewater treatment facility or water reclamation facility, after it's been treating the treated, the water is then released back into the environment that goes back down stream, and it becomes somebody else's drinking water. And in fact, this cup of water that I have in my hand right here that people can't see, you know, this is this water has been recycled on the earth over and over and over for billions of years. And I'm going to take a drink of it, and it was probably dinosaur p at one time.

Tiffany Vrska 6:00

So you're saying that there's one water? And it just may be in a different phase at any given point? Is that fair?

Michele Loudenback 6:09

I'm saying that yes, that's true water is in a different phase at any given point. So we can see it as a solid and ice or we can see it as a vapor, and clouds, etc, condensation and rain. But I'm also saying that wastewater itself is not a water type, the water is there, the waste is in the water. So water is just really the water and then whatever pollutants are in it. And that's what I mean, all water has pollution in it, it can come from actually just raining on the natural environment. That's the way it works. It can come from what we do in our daily lives. For instance, if someone is changing their oil, I'll just use this example on their driveway. And then they might spill some on the cement. Well, impervious surface does not allow water to soak in. So what happens is that water hits the ground, it picks up those pollutants, oil, or

let's say pet waste, or grass clippings, or I could go on and on whatever it is we put on the ground litter, et cetera. It'll pick that up and it goes straight into the nearest water source because stormwater, right, it's not treated before it goes. But again, it's just water. It's water with contaminants, right?

Tiffany Vrska 7:26

So you know the example you just use changing your oil, it's running off my driveway down the street into a water and let go and back into his stream. So we're all in the same cycle here. So why is it so important that people really understand and latch on to this one water concept?

Michele Loudenback 7:45

I'm so glad you asked that. It is crucially important to understand this concept because we all have to have fresh clean water to drink. And we all can do our part to make it so that it's easier to do that. With our award winning Water Treatment Plant award

Tiffany Vrska 8:05

winning you hear that?

Michele Loudenback 8:09

You have amazing operators and an amazing water treatment plant manager who really care about providing quality h₂o, which is water. Absolutely.

Tiffany Vrska 8:21

Shouts to Rachel and all of those hard workers out at our water treatment facility and Steve Hardman down at our water reclamation facility. They are both a plus employees superstars. I absolutely can't say enough good about them. Um, so So what are your future plans as far as spreading the one water message within your division and maybe some different things you have going on the horizon? We have all

Michele Loudenback 8:50

kinds of things going on over the horizon. Absolutely. As I mentioned before, coming up is green Norman eco month. We typically celebrate that from mid March to mid May. I know it's a little longer than a month but I'm a little bit hyperbolic.

Tiffany Vrska 9:04

It deserves more than 30 days.

Michele Loudenback 9:06

I agree. 100% agree. So we have a lot of activities during green Norman eco month coming up including cleanup and then we have some gardening workshops. We have some gardening maintenance, we could use volunteers here. We also have very excitingly the E waste collection event is scheduled now it's on Star Wars Day. May the fourth May the Fourth be with you all

Tiffany Vrska 9:34

right, affect everyone out there to be in their Star Wars costumes though. You gotta you gotta make it happen.

Michele Loudenback 9:43

I will actually do that. Thank you for saying that. So sure, come out and see me in my Star Wars costume because I will work when it's gonna go from nine to noon at Reeves Park. It'll be a lot of fun. It is a lot of fun. I know I say that people line up and they stay in their cars and we remove the Metairie. aerals, but we're also singing and dancing and having a good time because we're making a difference, right? Love that Earth Day Festival. Huge fun event. That's April 21. It's a Sunday. It's also at Reeves Park from noon to five. And I have definite confirmation from my Kosty that he's going to be playing. We're going to have food trucks this year. I'm very excited. So Monarch Festival, which is in October every year, and we have that at Andrews Park. Yes, this year, we went lower waist. And so I have actually expanded that to Earth Day this year. And so we are working toward or just moving a step closer to zero waste for this for this event. And that means that all of our food and drink vendors will not be using single use plastics or foam. Instead, there'll be using compostable materials. And we partnered with a with a company called fertile ground that does composting, food waste composting, and things like that. So they can help us manage this waste. Oh, my gosh, very awesome. Very exciting. Something else on the horizon that I'm very excited about? We're going to do a Solar Initiative here in Norman. So what is that? Well, that is actually maybe listeners have heard about solarize OKC, or solarized. Green Country. What it is, is really a group purchasing program, where our residents can come together during a pretty specified limited time, but received this deep discounts. And it's based on tears how many people participate and to put in solar panels on their homes. So not only will they be helping the environment and reducing climate pollution, but they will also be reducing their own electricity bills. So that's pretty exciting. That is awesome. So

Tiffany Vrska 11:48

where are we at in that process? So

Michele Loudenback 11:50

we currently issued an RFP to request for proposals. Excuse me, I speak in acronyms. We issued a request for proposals to partner with a solar installation company we received some answers and now we're going to do interviews next week. We should have accompany pretty soon can take it to council to get approval. So I'm looking right around the beginning of green woman Ico month

Tiffany Vrska 12:17

All right, so that'll fit right into the theme and all that fun stuff going on and something else

Michele Loudenback 12:22

coming up I know I'm sorry I've got a lot but can

Tiffany Vrska 12:25

you tell you we want to hear all about him Sure. Because there's

Michele Loudenback 12:27

a ton but but we have Lake Thunderbird watershed is impaired it's our drinking water lake Thunderbirds our drinking water it's our largest source of freshwater we also have well water and we can purchase from Oklahoma City. But this is our lake. Yeah, this is we drink this water. We drink our stormwater. That's another reason why I mentioned one water all the time because we do drink our stormwater. But Lake Thunderbird is impaired for nutrients and sediment. You know, we have algal blooms. Luckily, our water treatment plant has put in a lot of upgrades. And you can really taste the difference. Now when the lake turns over before, we might have had a little earthy flavor sometimes to the water. But I think the earthy, but I think I think everybody can agree that that's actually improved dramatically. And that is because of our award winning water treatment team and facility. But there are things we can do to make that better. And part of that is reducing the amount of nutrients that we put on our soil. What do I mean by nutrients? I mean nitrogen and phosphorus that we would see in fertilizers. So taking a soil test and only putting on the amount that's recommended, not maybe using organic fertilizers, that kind of thing would help? Well, we have monitoring stations throughout the watershed because we're required to determine what kind of pollution we're putting into our streams so we can reduce that right through some of our activities. Well, we found that the hottest so what does that mean? That means the highest nutrient load, the hottest area is in a square mile within the watershed. And so we've implemented something called the Blue neighborhood pilot program. We kicked off in October November where we were meeting with residents who are excited to to join, but it's a partnership with the residents in this area. It's a cost share program. There are certain best management practices or BMPs. That's another acronym we use a lot that residents can put on place on their own properties to help our water quality

and these practices our compost soil amendments, guess what compost can help suck up water and reduce pollution that's running off your lawn from stormwater picking up and you can have compost addition with or without wildflower seeding, so you could have some wildflowers and we have instant ratio of rain and or pollinator gardens which help also. And then finally, folks could put in rainwater harvesting through either rain barrels or through cisterns. So within this one square mile, we've had quite a bit of interest from that residence. So that's exciting. And we see installation happening again in the spring, about the time for green Armonico month. So all of these things are coming together at the same time. It's very exciting. Yay.

Tiffany Vrska 15:29

And I know that you all also have your very popular rain barrel.

Michele Loudenback 15:35

Oh, I'm so glad you said that. That was another thing I wanted to mention. You're absolutely right. This is goodness, probably the 10th year that we have participated in the central Oklahoma stormwater Alliance rain barrel promotion. This promotion is where folks in all the metro areas can order rain barrels that are made out of repurposed food grade food transporting barrels. So what does that mean? It means these barrels were used to transport things like pickles or olives, you can see it on the barrel, they're often stamped with olive oil, or Greek words, that kind of thing. They're cleaned out, they have all the fittings attached, and people can purchase them for 6999 6950. Online, they're shipped to our Lindsay yard. And people can pick them up during the distribution event, which is that first weekend in April, right? So

Tiffany Vrska 16:26

given those barrels another life which is great, reduce, reuse, recycle, yes. But

Michele Loudenback 16:31

always refuse first.

Tiffany Vrska 16:35

If you don't need it, then don't get it. Right. Exactly. Right, exactly. And also, I think during that sale, there are some other really cool gears and gadgets, oh, that they can get absolutely to conserve water for stuff out in the garden and all that good stuff. It's upcycle

Michele Loudenback 16:51

is the name of the company that we partner with and the link is on [green norman.org](http://greennorman.org). I'd recommend listeners always go to [green norman.org](http://greennorman.org). Because I post a lot of stuff on there about things that are coming up just saying. But you can go on there and upcycle has, they have wide overflows. So if you have a lot of rain coming from one gutter, it can collect a lot without splashing off. They have composting barrels, they can either turn or stationary, they have the pieces that go on the gutters to help there's drip hose. They're all good linkage between the barrels. So absolutely no. And they even have some things that you can decorate your barrels with, like netting if you want to hang plants on him, that kind of thing. So yeah,

Tiffany Vrska 17:37

and the best part about all of this is you'll be saving on your water bill. Right

Michele Loudenback 17:41

100%? Well, you know, I would say the best part of all of this is you'll be helping to prevent pollution from getting into our waterways. But the second best part,

Tiffany Vrska 17:54

both both huge benefits, win win.

Michele Loudenback 17:56

I'm always for Win win.

Tiffany Vrska 17:57

So is there anything else that you would like to share with our listeners right now I know that your team stays busy and stays on the run. And you always have lots of really cool things going on. So Well,

Michele Loudenback 18:09

I would say Please keep your eyes open on [green norman.org](http://greennorman.org) Because like you said, we have a lot going on and a lot in the works. One thing I do want to mention because I'm super proud about it is our learning and environmental advancement facility. We call it leaf. That's right, I'm all about acronyms. But leaf is going to be an area where we're gonna be able to do some demonstrations and some education, maybe grow our own plants to use on our own projects, you know, grow some trees that we can replace ones that we had to take out that kind of thing. Currently, I have five bee hotels, a bat house

and for beehives, as well as a hot and cold composting bin. And those were made through workshops. We're also

Tiffany Vrska 18:56

given tours of those because I might need to see the 100% the bat be motel situation,

Michele Loudenback 19:02

you know, I love to show off what we do because we do a lot and I'm proud of it. So come on, I invite everybody. But the cool thing about this one is that we're in the the process of getting a phase two assessment through EPA through their technical help program. So they'll come out send some workers out this spring again, green normally gonna send some workers out this spring to assess the site and then DEQ has agreed to accept us into their Brownfield program because leaf used to be where nature iser said, which was a composting facility. Interesting. So it's a Brownfield, which means it's an industrial site that now needs to be converted into something more useful. And so they're going to come in and we can remove all of the contamination. There's some glass and trash to leftover from what it used to be, but they're going to come in and help us remediate all of that, bring in new soil and I'm going to try to bring it back to a Prairie State ate, and then go from there. So it's really a lot of exciting things coming. Oh

Tiffany Vrska 20:05

my gosh, your world is full of excitement. And I love hearing about it. Michelle says, awesome. Thank you for being here in the studio with us today. We appreciate your time.

Michele Loudenback 20:13

Thank you for having me. I'm so excited to share with Norman, all of the great things we are doing. And also I want to throw a big shout out to our residents because they're part of what makes it happen without their volunteers and without them coming to workshops without them caring. We wouldn't be able to do it.

Tiffany Vrska 20:31

That's right. I second that. So questions or commentary 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. Visit NormanOK.gov/news to enroll for e-notifications on traffic advisories, upcoming events, election notices and more. Follow us on social Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube city of Norman Okay. 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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