

# Political consequences loom as senior center land deal drags on

By Mack Burke | Transcript News Editor   Oct 28, 2018



Another OU Board of Regents meeting came and went last week without a mention of the land deal between the University of Oklahoma and the city of Norman that was approved by the city council in December.

OU Vice President and general counsel Anil Gollahalli said the university has completed new land assessments, however, and is still willing to work with the city to reach an agreement more in line with the true value of the land.

"We certainly understand the city's need to find a suitable location for the Norman Forward projects -- whether that be on the currently proposed site or elsewhere -- and will be supportive of any direction the council chooses to take," he said.

Though Gollahalli said he believes a deal could still be viable, the absolute earliest the deal could go before the regents is during the Dec. 11-12 meeting in Oklahoma City, and the university has given no indication that it will.

Many Norman seniors now believe that the city would be better off selecting another location for a new senior center. If a solution isn't reached soon, some seniors have said it's time to hold the council accountable by voting against anything and everything else that comes up first, including the upcoming transportation bond and stormwater ballot measures.

Mayor Lynne Miller said she is aware that Norman seniors -- an influential voting bloc -- have threatened political ramifications if a solution isn't found. She said she is sympathetic to their frustrations and the city council and city staff are working toward a solution.

"It is very frustrating for the seniors and every one that has been working on the deal since 2015," she said. "Fortunately for the seniors, we have two other viable options: Reaves and Andrews parks. The problem is the funding."

Though it does not solve the funding question that continues to haunt the council, other council members have joined in the call to pursue other locations as confidence in the land deal wanes.

Council member Sereta Wilson is among them.

"I think it is time to look for new land," she said. "I would expect our seniors to lead a very vocal campaign against any additional funding for any and all projects for the city, based on their experiences with the botched senior center situation ... I have been amazed at the weird political obstacles that were thrown at creative solutions that myself and others have proposed."

Council member Joe Carter said he never favored the North Base location, which was selected before the land deal was finalized as the future home for a new stand-alone senior center in a rule-of-three initiated vote in February.

Carter's main criticisms of the location are that it isn't walkable or centrally located. Regardless, he said the mayor shoulders some blame for the lack of urgency.

"She seems intent on trying to dance with a partner that doesn't want to dance or doesn't know how to dance," Carter said. "She has placed us in a reactive position instead of a proactive position."

City officials had expected OU regents to vote on the deal in the spring, but a vote never came.

Internal emails acquired via an open records request submitted by former OU general counsel Fred Gipson indicate that the deal was being considered as a bargaining chip in the OU Foundation's arena negotiations with the city, though OU officials claimed the deal was merely waiting for the consideration and approval of new incoming OU President Jim Gallogly.

Interim Vice President for Public Affairs Erin Yarbrough said last month that the deal was further delayed because the original land appraisals were not accurate.

Council member Bill Hickman said he doesn't believe land assessments are to blame. He also supports pursuing new locations for the senior center and Norman Forward projects.

"The recent open records request on the UNP arena deal clearly shows that some city staff have been working against the council and were using the senior center as political leverage," he said. "I'm not confident that those who have been negotiating on behalf of the city have had the seniors' best interest in mind and have been representing what I believe is the clear will of this council. It appears that under the leadership of Mayor Miller, the city staff failed to prioritize the timely acquisition of the land for these projects in fulfillment of the promise to the taxpayers of Norman."

Not everyone on the council lays the blame at Miller's feet.

Council member Robert Castleberry said he's just as frustrated as everyone else but maintains that the city would already be breaking ground on a new senior center if Hickman, Wilson and Kate Bierman had not used the rule of three to push the issue in the first place.

He said it showed the city's hand just weeks before the meeting where regents were expected to approve the deal and was instrumental in allowing the university to use it as a bargaining chip in its push for a TIF-funded arena. Bierman said the land swap was already considered a bargaining chip well before the rule-of-three resolution came about but Castleberry maintains that the resolution gave the university leverage over the city.

"We would have the land, we would have all of that stuff if they wouldn't have given the university the bullet to shoot us with," he said. "I'm not excusing the university at all, but whether we like it or not, this is big boy negotiations. These are million-dollar deals and when you do million-dollar deals, people negotiate hard."

Now, he said the city is in the unfortunate position of having to negotiate a deal that could have already been done.

Still, he said it's better than the alternatives. If the city has to find another site for the senior center and other Norman Forward projects, it will end up costing the city money to acquire land that it was (and still could be) poised to trade for.

"I'm as frustrated as everyone else is, but I also don't want to spend millions of dollars to acquire land," he said. "We can make this deal happen and I'd rather do it right. It will just take some political will.

"I know that doesn't make seniors happy, and it doesn't make me happy, either. Government does not ever move as fast as it should."