

Evaluating city infrastructure needs

LOCAL COLUMN

On April 2, we had a very important municipal election. We had three propositions on the ballot which addressed critical infrastructure needs for our city.

Fortunately, Proposition 1 for a \$72 million transportation package passed easily. These local dollars will match federal money to provide a total of \$139 million in project costs. These projects will ease congestion, provide better traffic flow, and create safer driving conditions. Whenever possible, these projects will also include various modes of transportation, like walking and biking. All of which are great and necessary for a growing community like Norman.

To my great disappointment the two stormwater propositions did not pass.

While more people supported this utility package than they did in the previous stormwater election, Propositions 2 and 3 lost by significant margins. While early surveying and comments at Open Houses were primarily positive and many people acknowledged that they understood there is a significant problem to address, the majority of people commenting on Facebook and at meetings during the campaign had multiple reasons why this was not a good plan. Among the expressed reasons was a lack of trust in the City government, unfair and/or unnecessarily high fees, unwillingness to pay for fixing problems in other parts of town, and a belief by many individuals that they simply weren't contributing to the problem personally. Despite 22 months of a citizen committees' work and a robust education campaign, which included 30 community meetings and considerable social media coverage, the information I saw and heard being shared was often wrong and many people still did not appear to understand what they were going to pay.

Is there a fee that everyone is going to think is fair for them personally? Did we ask for too much? Should some people be exempt? Is distrust in city government so pervasive that no education campaign can make a difference?

I have been told repeatedly that funding an adequate stormwater program is one of the most difficult things for a city to do. Having worked on this for the last four years, that certainly appears to be true.

So where are we now?

We have 190 square miles of stormwater infrastructure and less than half the funding needed to maintain it. We simply do not have the capital funds for the millions of dollars of large stormwater projects spread out across the city. We have flooding issues across Norman and we have serious water quality problems at the lake, which provides 70% of our drinking water.

We have a TMDL order from DEQ to clean up the pollution in the lake. Staff has developed a detailed plan to do that, but we do not have the sufficient funds to fully implement it. The longer we delay the needed maintenance and repairs the more costly they will be to fix.

Additionally, we have a City budget with structural problems which means our costs are going up faster than our sales tax collection. Many people seem to think that ending the UNP TIF will fix the budget, while in fact, it will only fill a budget hole. It is not a fix.

A funding stream for stormwater would have made a significant difference going forward.

Why do I keep harping on these issues when people are tired of hearing about it, especially when it seems to make some people so angry?

Because it is the job of your Mayor and your City Council to let you know what our city needs in order to provide adequate services for you. It is the job of our staff to let us know what problems they are dealing with and what is required to fix them.

The city is responsible for providing services for the health, safety, and welfare of its citizens and services cost money.

I was elected to represent our community, and I believe that Norman's most pressing need is a funding source for our stormwater program. Thankfully, many others in our community also believed we needed to bring this issue back to our voters. Our Council voted unanimously to put these propositions on the ballot, knowing what a big challenge it was. Our Stormwater Citizens Committee members were dedicated to the task of coming up with a solution for our stormwater challenges. Our City staff worked tirelessly to help in the education process.

Our Chamber, Sierra Club, League of Women Voters, and Downtowners all stepped up to embrace the campaign. The Campaign Committee, made up of business people, environmentalist, church groups, and neighborhood representatives, raised money, dropped literature, put out signs, and struggled with Facebook. I will be forever grateful for their commitment and concern for our community.

I believe that if enough people really understand the problem, if they care about the community as a whole, and if they are willing to take part in the conversation from the beginning, we have the chance to solve big problems like stormwater. How do we bring more people to the table? How do we come up with a solution that the majority will support? Will it really take a major precipitating event like Tulsa's big flood? I hope not. This is an issue that still must be confronted.



Lynne Miller

Mayor's Corner mayor@normanOK.gov