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Miller expresses optimism, concern in first official State of the City Address

By Mack Burke | Transcript News Editor 48 min ago



Kyle Phillips / The Transcript

Mayor Lynne Miller speaks Tuesday during the first official State of the City Address at city hall.



Mayor Lynne Miller made history Tuesday by delivering the first official State of the City Address at city hall.

Her 30-minute speech touched on challenges the city faces, but the mayor, in her third year at the helm, was largely positive in her focus and tone.

Miller said Norman is a community that appreciates its great schools, affordable housing, green spaces, safety and security, and diversity.

She said Norman is recognized as a great place to pay off student loan debt, raise a family and retire, and, with so many annual events, has earned its nickname: the city of festivals.

She thanked the city council, staff and volunteers for their dedication and applauded outgoing City Manager Steve Lewis for his 11 years of service to the city before delving into broad-stroke analysis of the city's accomplishments and challenges.

First, the mayor addressed the city's growth rate.

"Norman's population is now estimated to be over 126,000 people," she said. "We continue to grow at about the same rate we've grown for years. In 2017, we grew at 1.41 percent ... We have a very steady growth rate and that is expected to continue into about 2023."

Later, she touched on infrastructure improvements and why traffic cones are a sign of progress. From Lindsey Street to Main Street, she said road improvements have been a trying but necessary leap forward. She recognized Cleveland County as a valuable partner, particularly for its role in helping maintain hundreds of miles of roads in east Norman.

While celebrating the city's ADA transition plan update -- the first since 1993 -- Miller said there is progress to come.

She said an ADA citizens committee will be appointed and a new staff member will be hired to address accessibility issues and help implement the plan.

Environmental policy advancements, such as the city council's adoption of the Ready for 100 plan and green building incentives, were other positive highlights for Miller, who praised Norman for its commitment to recycling.

"At a 90 percent recycling rate, we lead the state," she said.

Miller pointed to Norman Forward as another pillar of progress for the city, from the new Westwood Family Aquatic Center's record-breaking opening season to the east side library dedication in July, and, most recently, the groundbreaking earlier this month at the new indoor tennis facility.

On public safety, Miller said the city is maintaining its standard of excellence and working to improve for the future with upgrades to technology, emergency communication systems and the Norman Fire Department's vehicle fleet. She also praised community partnerships, like the Safety Resource Officer program co-funded by the city and Norman Public Schools.

"This is another important example of our partnership with NPS, and I can't think of a more important time for us to be helping out with these safety initiatives," she said.

On social issues, Miller again highlighted Norman's successes, such as the highly attended Mayor's Interfaith Prayer Breakfast, becoming one of just 64 cities nationwide to meet the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's standard for ending chronic veteran homelessness, the city's resolution to officially recognize Indigenous' Peoples Day and the city's decision to change the name of DeBarr Avenue, which was named after KKK leader and founding OU professor Edwin DeBarr.

After so many reasons to celebrate, Miller finally moved on to reasons for concern: lagging sales tax growth, flat NPS enrollment and employer concerns about access to a skilled and educated workforce. She said the city needs to improve its permitting and development process and find ways to encourage business growth through partnerships and planning.

"All cities have a primary responsibility for smart economic growth and Norman is no different," she said. "We are very fortunate to be able to work with our partners -- OU, Moore-Norman Technology Center and the chamber -- through the Norman Economic Development Coalition.

"This past year, our council has had three representatives on a committee that was assigned to develop a comprehensive economic development strategic plan for our city. This has not been done for many, many years."

Miller said that produced a six-point plan to address and enhance smart growth.

"Strategic planning is a key for success," she said. "Now, we need to put the plan into action. We must recognize that we are in an increasingly competitive metropolitan area where our surrounding cities are putting a considerable amount of time, effort and money into advancing their economic growth.

"Oklahoma City and Edmond are good examples of this, but I am not saying for a minute that I want us to be Edmond or Oklahoma City. I don't. We're our own unique community, but we are being challenged.

"The fact that we are in a state where cities are reliant to a great extent on sales tax means we cannot be complacent about our workforce education, a business-friendly environment, targeted intentional support of businesses and a desirable quality of life. These things cannot be taken for granted, and they do not happen accidentally."

Despite the failed OU Foundation arena proposal, Miller said she still believes University North Park represents an opportunity for economic development. She is also looking forward to a possible stormwater utility vote in 2019 and is optimistic that the city council will find ways to address the city's systemic budget issues.

"Our council continues to have challenges," she said. "Three areas of major focus for the council are the budget, the senior center site and its funding, and a solution to stormwater. Our budget has some systemic problems and we hope that our council can solve them this year.

"By restructuring the [current UNP] TIF or ending it and passing the stormwater utility, we can go a long way toward relieving our budget shortfalls. But we cannot just do one. We have to do everything."

In closing, Miller, again, took an optimistic tone.

"The city of Norman has accomplished a great deal over the last year and a half, and there is no reason we cannot continue to do more," she said. "The opportunities are all there for us, but none of these things would've been possible without our city council, our great staff, our amazing citizen volunteers and all of our community partners ... In the famous words of Margaret Mead, 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.'"

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