

Norman's rejection of stormwater improvements criticized

By: Daisy Creager The Journal Record April 3, 2019 0



Sandbags are placed in front of a stormwater drain near a construction site in Norman. (Journal Record file photo)

The defeat of two propositions Tuesday to improve stormwater drainage and water quality in Norman will continue a “slow bleed” on the community that is threatening to cause “serious public health issues,” Norman Director of Public Works Shawn O’Leary said Wednesday.

A package of three propositions, put forward as the Vision for Norman proposal, was described by the group as a “practical and fiscally responsible funding solution” to address citywide

traffic, flooding and water quality.

Proposition 2, which failed with 42.61% of votes, was a \$60 million stormwater bond funding 33 stormwater infrastructure projects that aren’t backed by state or federal funds.

The bond would have raised property taxes by \$5.25 per month for the average Norman property owner with a market value of \$150,000, according to the Vision for Norman website.

Proposition 3, which failed with 39.67% of votes, would have complemented Proposition 2 by creating a stormwater utility to fund maintenance and upkeep of the stormwater system. The utility would cost homeowners between \$3 and \$9 a month, depending on square footage, with a 30% discount for agricultural land owners and low-income residents.

It would cost nonresidential properties \$12, \$45, \$80 or \$160 per month, depending on total parcel size.

Proposition 3 was the second proposed stormwater utility to be rejected by voters. Voters rejected a similar proposal in August 2016.

O’Leary said the city will not be able to afford proposed flood control projects intended to “restore safety to neighborhoods,” hiring of additional staff members and efforts to improve water quality – much less maintain infrastructure currently in place.

“We’ve got really old systems out there that need to be upgraded,” O’Leary said. “We’ve got miles and miles of streams and channels that need to be cleaned and so on.

“It’s all pretty bad news, I think. I just don’t think it’s going to turn out well for the city of Norman in the long term.”

O’Leary said before recent updates to Lindsey Street, floods would prevent ambulances from driving down it for days to weeks at a time. A 2018 storm washed away the bridge over Brookhaven Creek on W. Main Street. He is afraid a lack of investment in drainage systems and infrastructure will lead to more incidents posing public health problems.

University of Oklahoma professor Robert Nairn, director of the Center for Restoration of Ecosystem and Watersheds, said several factors led Norman to be “a 21st-century city with late-19th-century, early-20th-century infrastructure.”

A major factor is the absence of a stormwater utility to serve as the dedicated funding source of stormwater issues. Nairn said Norman is the only city of its size in Oklahoma without one.

“Without the dedicated funding towards capital improvements (and) the infrastructure, we’re back to square one,” Nairn said. “We’re in that same situation where we’ve got a problem and there are no resources dedicated to addressing that problem.”

Norman is also in a unique situation in that its urban stormwater runoff goes to Lake Thunderbird, its source of drinking water. Water quality degradation due to this runoff has led the state to dub it an impaired body of water.

O’Leary said continued pollution will increase costs of treating the water beyond what would be paid in a stormwater utility.

He said Norman, Moore and Oklahoma City are on notice by the state to stop pollution before it enters the lake. If the city does not get funding to make the needed changes, the state could levy fees and additional mandates against the city.

The utility is hard to implement in Norman because of a city charter ordinance requiring new utility fees or fee increases to pass a vote of the people – which O’Leary said “99.9% of those other cities” do not have, instead allowing them to be passed by city council.

O’Leary said the city has been trying to educate the public about the need for the fee, but it is difficult to get voters to understand.

Nairn said he thinks there is a direct tie between water quality and availability of water and success of businesses.

“The more and better water you have available is going to be better overall from an economic perspective than having poor quality of water and flooding concerns,” Nairn said. “There’s a definite reason we all (should) get on the same page about this and do what’s best for the city.”

Scott Martin, president and chief executive officer of the Norman Chamber of Commerce, said the chamber supported the measures and is disappointed at the failure of propositions 2 and 3, but wants to help the city develop solutions.

“We’re anxious to sit down and work with our elected officials to work out some of these issues that are facing our community,” he said.

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