

Living for the city

Review:

Revisiting some of the top city council stories of 2018

2018: YEAR IN REVIEW

The Feb. 12 mayoral election is fast approaching and a slew of issues await the city council when it returns Jan. 8 for its first meeting of 2019.

But before we look to the future, let's look back at some of the top stories to come out of city hall in 2018.

University North Park saga

The state of the University North Park TIF and the OU Foundation's arena proposal was undeniably the most closely followed saga of the city calendar in 2018. The arena proposal, which was first publicly unveiled in fall 2017, became a lightning rod of controversy that resolved (for the time being) with the foundation pulling out of the deal in July.

The foundation's decision followed months of heated debate about the proposal, the swearing in of two new council members who opposed the deal and The Transcript's publication of a story on "The Grand Bargain," a private draft agreement between the city, Norman Tax Increment Finance Authority, University North Park LLC and University Town Center LLC.

The city council has since set its sights on ending the TIF as soon as possible. In November, it passed a measure stating that desire in no uncertain terms and requesting an official recommendation from the TIF statutory

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City Manager Steve Lewis, center, and City Attorney Jeff Bryant listen to Mayor Lynne Miller speak during the July 24 city council meeting at city hall. Both Lewis and Bryant reached separation agreements with the city in 2018.

Cody Giles / The Transcript



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From **Page A1** committee, which has yet to meet.

First enacted in 2006 with the aim of stimulating growth in the undeveloped area between Robinson Street and Rock Creek Road along I-35, the UNP TIF has been praised as both an economic success — responsible for \$230 million in private investment, according to former City Attorney Jeff Bryant — and decried as a disaster for its failure to deliver a regional draw, while cannibalizing Norman's spending dollars and reducing the flow of sales tax dollars to the general fund. Similarly, the arena proposal was touted by proponents as an economic engine that could help attract outside dollars and jobs to Norman and criticized by opponents as a drain on city tax dollars.

City staff shake-up

The city of Norman enters the new year in search of a new city manager and a new city attorney after both positions were vacated in 2018.

Former City Manager Steve Lewis officially left the position in September after 11 years following a negative review process by the city council, characterized by concerns over staffing decisions and other systemic issues, that resulted in a separation agreement.

Interim City Manager Mary Rupp was appointed in September, and the city has since contracted national recruiting firm Springsted Waters to aid in the ongoing search for a permanent replacement.

Monday was City Attorney Jeff Bryant's final day at the helm of the city's legal department. Similar to Lewis, he came to a separation agreement with the city after 14 years as city attorney.

Bryant's resignation brought to close a hushed political saga that followed the UNP arena proposal and escalated over the fall with the city council adjourning into executive session multiple times to discuss a possible investigation.

Though nearly all details of were kept private through executive session, some council members publicly expressed waning faith in Bryant for what they perceived as communication failures and non-transparent dealings on behalf of the city.

In 2018, the city also hired a new chief communications officer. Annahlyse Meyer assumed the role following the departure of Claudia Deakins.

CART gets cut

In October, the city council approved a new \$635,500 contract with CART, but it did not include \$300,000 in additional funds that the University of Oklahoma had requested via a letter that surprised city officials in August.

OU Parking and Transportation Director Kris Glenn said CART has operated at a combined loss of about \$780,000 over the last two years. He said the current model is not sustainable, and, in the fall, OU announced service cuts that will take effect Wednesday.

The changes will affect routes 10-Main Street and 21-Alameda/E. Norman and will mean a reduction in frequency for those routes and the end of all bus service on Saturdays.

Glenn said CART will continue operating all campus and city routes Monday through Friday, as well as CARTaccess, but the university, under the leadership of first-year President James Gallogly, has expressed its broader intention to get out of public transit.

Given the university's position, the goal, according to city officials, is to transfer service from OU to the city or another operator by the end of Fiscal Year 2019. The city is currently working to secure a consultant to help with the transition, which Public Works Director Shawn O'Leary has characterized as "atypical."

Norman Forward moving forward

There were some major milestones in 2018 for the city's \$148 million voter-approved quality-of-life initiative.

After a one-year delay, the Westwood Family Aquatic Center opened with fanfare in May.

The center, which features a 50-meter pool, diving platforms, large splash pad, two winding tube slides and two other large slides, a lazy river and other amenities, stayed busy all summer, hitting a new attendance record and selling out of season passes.

The new \$5 million east side library opened in July next door to Fire Station No. 9, just east of 24th Avenue on Alameda Street. It includes a 1,100-square-foot children's area, 3,700-square-foot teens and adult area and a community program room with seating for 100. It, too, has proven to be a highly utilized attraction since opening its doors.

After unveiling the first Norman Forward arts project in 2017, the city finalized plans in 2018 for the piece that will accompany the new central library.

The towering sculpture, made of swirling aluminum pages, will ultimately grace the front entrance of the new central public library, which is slated to open this year.

Standing at just over 46 feet tall and 26 feet wide, the sculpture will include 275 aluminum sheets.

The city had to settle for a rental instead of a purchase for the new Griffin Soccer Complex land, but that deal appears to be all but done, which will allow that project to move forward, as well.

The city has yet to settle on a location for the indoor aquatic center and multisport facility, but the council is still in contact with the University of Oklahoma concerning a possible deal to acquire land near the YMCA for both those projects and, possibly, a new senior center.

That brings us to our penultimate stop on the 2018 rewind tour ...

Unfinished business the council faces

Some long familiar issues will hang over into 2019.

Though it appears to be closer, the city has yet to secure funding or finalize a site for a stand-alone senior center.

The city council is expected to soon finalize the details of the city's largest-ever transportation bond for an upcoming ballot, and, after over a year of study, the details of the next stormwater utility and bond proposal.

The city also has yet to finalize a new franchise deal with OG& E after contract renewal came under council scrutiny in late 2017.

The formation of a Regional Transit Authority moved forward in 2018, but there is still a lot of track to cover before it goes to voters for final approval.

The fate of CART is another open-ended issue that the council will grapple with in 2019.

On the peripherals, the city council will look to finalize its license agreements with e-scooter companies and continue to explore diaper changing table requirements, a tree ordinance, short-term rental regulations and a possible fee for commercial plastic bags.

Stay tuned.

Norman Mayor Lynne Miller cuts the ribbon during a ceremony at the Norman Public Library East branch last year.

Kyle Phillips / The Transcript