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Retired educator learns new lessons as mayor

By Joy Hampton Senior Staff Writer Nov 27, 2016



Retired educator Lynne Miller said she's learned many lessons in her new role as Norman's mayor.

Joy Hampton / The Transcript

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Senior Staff Writer

Some days, retired school principal and former teacher Lynne Miller feels busier than she was as a career educator. Miller hasn't really quit educating, but her students look a little different these days — they're mostly adults of voting age.

Now five months into her first term as Norman's mayor, Miller's leadership style has emerged as a mentor-educator approach. No surprises there. In addition to four new council members, Norman has a number of ongoing projects unfolding with more work still to be done.

"It's going fast," Miller said of her days in office. "It's been busy."

Ongoing city projects include upgrades at the city's water and wastewater plants, the Lindsey Street widening and other bond projects, water and sewer line replacements, neighborhood street repairs, public safety projects, and Norman Forward projects including two libraries, the Westwood pool and soccer field upgrades.

Add the stormwater utility fee, downtown road projects, a form-based code overlay for Center City and potential budget shortfalls from depressed sales tax, and it's no wonder Miller is busy.

Serving as mayor is different than sitting on city council, she said.

"When I'm in the office, all of the things we're working seem more connected," Miller said. "I knew that the staff is really good, but they're so helpful, and the fact I have staff makes a real difference."

Miller enjoys being part of team that puts the council agenda together, a process that allows her to see how things fit together, she said.

"It's hard work," Miller said. "It's trying to make good decisions after absorbing a huge amount of information and listening to a lot of different people. It's not always right and wrong. Sometimes it's right and right or wrong and wrong, and you just have to make the best decision you can, regardless of the political pressure you're getting."

There is a fun side, as well.

"I've been surprised about the number of ceremonial duties and how important they are," Miller said. "Like Veteran's Day. It's an honor to make a speech as mayor. Those things are really gratifying."

Stormwater still a priority

"We have to do this," she said. "That's certainly not the only thing we're going to do, but we've got to get our priorities straight."

Miller said while the August ballot proposition for the city's stormwater utility failed, she learned a lot from the 25 public meetings held to educate the public, most of which she attended.

"We learned what people knew, what they didn't know, and what they didn't understand about stormwater quality," Miller said. "We saw the impact of having such a diverse geographical area."

Rural Norman is unique and was a "huge factor that had been under-estimated," when city leaders created the stormwater plan, she said.

"Once people had listened to the information, they understood that we need to do something about stormwater," Miller said. "We need to do a better job of educating our public."

Miller hopes to come up with a new plan that will appeal to Norman residents.

A recent panel discussion and Q and A session with water experts was the first of many meetings Miller plans to educate council members and the public. That meeting focused on water quality and the classification of Lake Thunderbird as a sensitive water body.

Tuesday, city leaders will look at funding options for a comprehensive stormwater program during a 5:30 p.m. study session. Miller said a new stormwater proposal will have to start small to win voter approval.

In the meantime, the city needs to fund storm drain maintenance, pollution prevention and capital improvements for erosion and flooding, as well as pay for mandated monitoring and other requirements in the TMDL implementation program.

Senior center discussions

"Even back in 2008, the important input we needed to get from seniors was 'what kind of programming do you want from the center?'" Miller said. "Every schematic that we've looked at, whatever the site, we've determined we need at least 21,000 square feet to do what the seniors want."

Miller inherited a senior center debate that leaves many Norman residents confused.

A bond issue passed in 2008 supplies money to renovate the existing Norman Public Library into a new 20,000 square foot senior center. That remodeling can't be done until the new central library opens, but a senior group is advocating for a stand-alone center in Andrews Park. They don't like the parking available at the existing library site, and they want to be closer to the park and the library.

Unfortunately, the bond money can't be used to build a stand-alone center, leaving the project without funding.

Miller said she is sympathetic to the wishes of the 21st Century Seniors group, but the \$8 million price tag means the stand-alone project must be delayed until money becomes available through Norman Forward or other avenues.

Meanwhile, other, less vocal seniors have contacted her, wanting to move forward with the library remodel.

Fortunately, it's a decision she doesn't have to make alone. In a recent council discussion, city leaders bowed to the senior advocacy group's wishes and will table the item while setting up a reserve fund to save toward implementation in the future.

Miller believes dynamic programming for meaningful activities will be key to a successful senior center whatever the future location.

Reviewing lessons

Miller established review sessions of major projects to bring four new council members up to speed, but also as a reminder for seasoned leaders.

"We have a lot of complex issues we're working with right now, like the Center City," she said. "I love the concept of Center City. I believe it is the kind of forward looking development that could really take Norman to the next level, particularly in attracting millennials and seniors that want to live in an urban setting near the university."

Miller believes the form-based code overlay needs to be mandatory or incentivized.

"I am concerned about the infrastructure to serve that area — water, stormwater, alleys, sidewalks," she said. "We're going to need that to make it work."

While transportation upgrades and Norman Forward projects now unfolding have funding, other projects do not.

"We have all these great things we want to do, but they all take money," Miller said.

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