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ALERT FEATURED

OU seeks land appraisals

By Mack Burke | Transcript News Editor 4 hrs ago



Kyle Phillips / The Transcript

OU President James Gallogly speaks to employees during a staff forum Thursday at the University of Oklahoma's Meacham Auditorium.

Kyle Phillips

Last week, Mayor Lynne Miller sent a letter asking the OU Board of Regents to move forward on the city's pending land deal with the university.

She said she never received a response, but in a way she got an answer when the item did not appear on the regents' agenda.

The university has since provided more concrete information.

"The new administration has requested that new third party appraisals be done on the tracts in question," said OU interim Vice President for Public Affairs Erin Yarbrough. "The original appraisals had serious premise flaws and were inaccurate on their face. Proper appraisals are important before any recommendations can be made to the Regents. We are hopeful that work will be completed soon."

Miller said she was frustrated by the news but not surprised.

"It is very unfortunate that the regents did not consider this last spring," she said. "I think it was this past March that they were supposed to have it on the agenda. Now we have a new president and his major focus is finding money and cutting expenses."

In late February, the city council approved a plan to use \$8.75 million in University North Park TIF funds to build a stand-alone senior and cultural center on land to be leased from the university near the YMCA. The plan was predicated on a land agreement approved in December that the city and OU were slated to finalize in the spring.

Some council members claim that OU was holding the deal hostage dependent on whether the council approved the OU Foundation's plan to build a new privately owned arena in University North Park with tax increment financing assistance.

A Feb. 28 email from OU real estate department administrator Chad Cochell to then associate vice president and university CFO Chris Kuwitzky, obtained through an open records request made by Fred Gipson, supports that conclusion.

"Ahead of the meeting tomorrow ... requested by Carl Edwards and Frank Hill, Carl sent me a text with Frank copied stating the arena deal is in real trouble if the senior center trade (accompanying the aquatics and multipurpose buildings at North Campus) is completed and they need more time," the email reads. "He then asked that we not do anything in regard to the deal until we can meet tomorrow morning."

Hill is an attorney with McAfee and Taft, a firm that has served as counsel for both the OU Foundation and the City of Norman. Edwards is the co-founder of Price and the chairman of the Presbyterian Health Foundation board, as well as the former chairman of the Greater Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce.

The mayor is not alone in her frustration. Like the city council, Norman seniors thought a deal was all but done. They have long waited for a senior center and endured uncertainty about the Norman Forward Project, and now, that uncertainty will continue.

"We believe that, as public entities, both the City of Norman and the University of Oklahoma, should strive to ensure that any agreement they enter into is fair and equitable to both parties," Norman Seniors Association Chairman Richard Bailey said. "We look forward to them resolving any questions about the value of the various parcels of land and finalizing the agreement so we are able to move forward with the three Norman Forward projects as soon as possible."

The other two Norman Forward projects Bailey references are the multi-sport facility and the indoor aquatic center. Those are becoming soft spots, too.

Nancy Yoch, has worked with the Pisces Project since 2005. The project's aim was to get an indoor swim complex built in Norman and the group was instrumental in shaping and promoting Norman Forward.

"We had hoped that the facility would be completed by 2020, but at this rate we can't move forward," she said. "It's frustrating, because the city is ready to move forward ... And I think people were under the impression it was going to move forward in June when it got pulled from the regents agenda.

"Here we're stuck. And we're in it together with the seniors. We're hopeful that this deal can still happen but we're starting to look for new locations."

Land deal tension, the looming possibility that OU makes major cuts to the CART bus system and the contentious debate surrounding the OU Foundation's arena proposal underscore a relationship between the university and the city that might not be sour but certainly is less sweet as of late.

The issue came up during OU President James Gallogly's State of the University address last month when one audience member asked how the university would repair its relationship with the city.

Gallogly said he believes the university has a good relationship with the city and its measures to cut costs, either through cuts to the CART system or other dealings with the city, are not meant to be punitive, merely practical.



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2 hours ago

The current president certainly has numerous messes to clean up following the last president. I am sure glad the current president was not put in place as a political patronage hire.