

CITY COUNCIL SPECIAL SESSION MINUTES

June 15, 2021

The City Council of the City of Norman, Cleveland County, State of Oklahoma, met in a Special Session at 5:30 p.m. hosted in the Municipal Building Council Chambers on the 15th day of June, 2021, And notice and agenda of the meeting were posted in the Municipal Building at 201 West Gray 48 hours prior to the beginning of the meeting.

PRESENT: Councilmembers Foreman, Hall,
Holman, Nash, Peacock, Petrone,
Schueler, Studley, Mayor Clark

ABSENT: None

Item 1, being:

CONSIDERATION OF ADJOURNING INTO AN EXECUTIVE SESSION AS AUTHORIZED BY OKLAHOMA STATUTES, TITLE 25 § 307(B)(4) TO DISCUSS PENDING LITIGATION ASSOCIATED WITH FLESKE HOLDING COMPANY, L.L.C., VS. CITY OF NORMAN, CLEVELAND COUNTY COURT CASE CV-2018-956.

Motion to Adjourn. Moved by Councilmember Holman. Seconded by Councilmember Foreman. Ayes: Mayor Clark, Councilmembers Foreman, Hall, Holman, Nash, Peacock, Petrone, Schueler, and Studley. Nays: None.

The City Council convened into Executive Session at 5:31 p.m. Ms. Kathryn Walker, City Attorney; Mr. Darrel Pyle, City Manager; and Mr. Rick Knighton, Assistant City Attorney, were in attendance at the Executive Session.

Motion to Reconvene. Moved by Councilmember Foreman. Seconded by Councilmember Holman. Ayes: Mayor Clark, Councilmembers Foreman, Hall, Holman, Nash, Peacock, Petrone, Schueler, and Studley. Nays: None.

The Mayor declared the motion carried and the Special Session was reconvened at 6:15 p.m.

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Item 2, being:

DISCUSSION REGARDING THE TRANSIT LONG RANGE PLAN.

Mr. Shawn O'Leary, Director of Public Works, introduced Mr. Taylor Johnson, Public Transit Coordinator, and Mr. James Gamez with Nelson/Nygaard. He said the City is completing its 23rd month of operating the public transit system and the buses never stop running. He said Staff has learned a lot in that time and now is the time to look to the future and decide what type of transit system the City wants in five to ten years.

Staff has been working with Nelson/Nygaard Consulting Associates, Inc., (Nelson/Nygaard) for a comprehensive evaluation of the existing transit service to identify opportunities to improve transit service for the community. The study will be a strategic plan to optimize and expand transit over the next 20 years. He said outreach activities included promotion of the project website to citizens and stakeholders, public meetings, and promotion of an online survey to obtain feedback on existing transit service and suggestions for potential improvements.

Mr. Gamez said in February 2019, the Regional Transportation Authority of Central Oklahoma was created in preparation for a Regional Transportation System. In July 2019, the University of Oklahoma (OU) asked the City to take over operations of the Cleveland Area Rapid Transit (CART) system so the City partnered with EMBARK Oklahoma City to operate the EMBARK Norman Transit System. The transit system is currently free to riders, including EMBARK Plus (paratransit) for citizens with disabilities who are unable to ride the fixed route system. In November 2019, a transit sales tax was approved and in July 2020 the transit study began. In November 2020, the Fleet Maintenance and Operations Facility project broke ground for transit and emergency vehicles.

Item 2, continued:

Mr. Gamez said the transit study included 1) Existing Conditions Analysis – routes, schedules, ridership, destinations, paratransit trips, demographics, employment and travel patterns; 2) Scenario Planning - consisted of community meetings and online surveys as well as discussions with bus drivers, mechanics, and stakeholders; and 3) Report Development – route changes, service expansion, transit center, bus stops, and new buses.

The Transit Study reviewed major destinations such as University of Oklahoma; Sooner Mall; University Town Center; Walmart Supercenter stores; Community Services Building; and Robinson Crossing shopping center. The study also reviewed existing routes as well as the transit market that includes families without a car, seniors who do not drive, employees without a car, students, low-wage employees; and commuters to and from Oklahoma City.

Mr. Gamez said community feedback regarding rider satisfaction included safety on the bus – 48% of riders were satisfied, 44% were neutral and 8% were unsatisfied; reliability of schedule – 47% of riders were satisfied, 41% were neutral, and 12% were unsatisfied; speed of service – 34% were satisfied, 39% were neutral, and 32% were unsatisfied; frequency of service – 29% were satisfied, 39% were neutral, and 32% were unsatisfied; days of service – 24% were satisfied, 38% were neutral, and 38% were unsatisfied; comfort at bus stops – 23% were satisfied, 50% were neutral, and 27% were unsatisfied; and hours of service – 23% were unsatisfied, 37% were neutral, and 40% were unsatisfied.

Mr. Gamez said community feedback regarding preferred service improvements included the need for later service on weekends; earlier morning service; more routes to more places; later evening service; more shelters at bus stops; later evening service; more frequent service on weekdays; more frequent service on weekends; and other. Some of the comments included the need for busses to run every 30 minutes and Sunday service; busses to run seven days a week; a route to east Library; more service for the elderly to get to groceries, medicine, socializing, etc.; and circular routes making it difficult to travel to destinations and return home in a short time.

Mr. Gamez said after reviewing existing routes Nelson/Nygaard found strengths to be extensive coverage areas; free fare; service ending at 10:00 p.m., and high ridership in east Norman. Opportunities for improvement could include Sunday service, longer hours of service on Saturdays, more frequent service, service to new areas, and more direct routes. He said east Norman is underserved with the existing east side Route No. 111 being the busiest in Norman. He highlighted route scenarios and said community input indicated 32% preferred a combination of Scenarios A and B; 31% preferred Scenario B only; 27% preferred Scenario A only; and 10% preferred no changes to existing routes.

Mr. Gamez said the recommended route network from Nelson/Nygaard provides the following:

- Improves access to key destinations
 - Norman Regional Healthplex
 - University Town Center
 - Walmart Supercenter stores
 - Sooner Mall
 - Cleveland County Wellness Block (The Well)
- Extends service to Garland Square
- Extends service to 12th Avenue Recreation Center
- Provides framework for future expansion

Future expansions could consist of adding Sunday service; upgrading frequencies; adding two new routes (Classen Boulevard and East Alameda Street), and extending service to Moore-Norman Technology Center.

Councilmembers were concerned about making changes to Route No. 111 (route with highest ridership) since the proposed route would place some bus stops even farther away from the people who really depend on public transit. Mr. Taylor Johnson, Public Transit Coordinator, said Staff will review that and the public as well as Council input will always be a part of transit route change discussions prior to changes taking place.

Item 2, continued:

In searching for a Downtown Transit Center, Nelson/Nygaard looked at City owned parcels; centrally located areas; proximity to Norman Depot; and vacant or retro-fittable tracts. The evaluation criteria included pedestrian access; adjacent land uses; operational efficiency; and proximity to Norman Depot. The locations identified included Option A – Norman Station (The Depot), Option B – Gray Street Parking Lot, and Option C – James Garner at City Hall. Mr. Gamez said the Depot location checked all the evaluation criteria boxes because it provides capacity for up to six buses; is in close proximity to local destinations, such as Main Street, City Hall, Cleveland County Complex; and promotes multimodal connectivity with Legacy Trail, Amtrak, and future regional light rail commuter service.

Nelson/Nygaard fare analysis review and peer city best practices included generally low base fares - \$1.00; daily and monthly pass options; agreements with OU for student fees, contract revenue; and funding partnerships. Mr. Gamez said a great example for peer review is Missoula, Montana's transit service (fare free), which began in 2015 as a partnership with 11 local businesses, has grown to 24 members, is attractive to new businesses, allows transit managers to focus on other sustainability efforts, and builds on community support.

Fare policy recommendations include the following:

- Allow ridership to recover from pandemic and adjust to route changes
- Continuously re-evaluate potential for fare implementation
- Begin discussions with OU regarding funding partnership and student pass

Mr. Gamez said in two years the City can re-evaluate service and continue operating fare free or implement a new fare policy that establishes a fare structure with low base fares to mitigate potential ridership loss; partner with OU on student bus program; adopt fare technology in line with best practices; and explore potential alignment with EMBARK OKC's fare policy.

Summarized recommendations include: Update and Streamline the Route Network – realign bus routes to better serve the needs of existing and potential transit riders by improving access to key destinations and reducing travel time; Establish a Downtown Transit Center – relocate the local route transfer hub from the OU Campus to Downtown Norman to maximize efficiency and allow for future service expansion; Strategically Expand Bus Service – extend routes to serve emerging destinations, offer longer hours and more frequent service, and operate on Sundays; Upgrade and Standardize Fleet – replace aging vehicles and assemble a uniform fleet to minimize maintenance costs and pursue Federal Transit Administration (FTA) grants for replacement buses; Continue to Operate Fare Free – avoid costly collection equipment on new buses and allow riders to adjust to route changes and the local economy to recover from the pandemic before re-evaluating the fare policy; and Promote Transit Supportive Land Use – make transit easier to access and encourage more sustainable development and maximize rider safety, comfort, and convenience.

Mr. Gamez said final adoption of the Transit Plan is anticipated to take place June 22nd. Next steps include preparing for route network redesign, establishing a Downtown Transit Center; installing new bus stops; and coordinating with EMBARK on updating ridership information, performing rider outreach, and making necessary operational changes. He said implementation of recommended route network redesign is anticipated to take place in fall 2023.

Items submitted for the record

1. PowerPoint presentation entitled, "EMBARK GO Norman Transit Study," dated June 15, 2021

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ADJOURNMENT

The Mayor adjourned the meeting at 7:45 p.m.

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ATTEST:

City Clerk

Mayor