

November 21, 2023

Comprehensive Land Use Plan Steering Committee members

From: Mayor Larry Heikkila

RE: Resignation of Chair of the AIM Committee

Several council members are attempting to derail the AIM Committee by interfering with the selection of the Chairperson and the selection of the committee members on the subcommittees. I believe Norman residents in all Wards should know of this interference and the political gamesmanship currently being played out against a citizen who volunteered her time to help Norman plan for the next 20 years.

As we all now know, on November 8, 2023, Elizabeth resigned as the Chair of the Comprehensive Land Use Plan (AIM) Steering Committee, with grace and dignity. I advised her not to do so and tried to convince her to come before the City Council on November 14th instead. Please read why I wanted her to come to address Council.

According to the city code, "Subject to the final approval of the Council, the Mayor shall appoint individuals to all appointive boards and commissions as vacancies occur" (Code 1976, §2-109, Ord. No. 0-7475-35)

As you will read below, after receiving applications from interested citizens, I nominated the original selection of individuals in January 2023, since then the council has modified the selection four times. And now they have forced the resignation of my appointed Chairperson. I contend that City Council has overstepped its bounds, as prescribed by the City Code in this process. My objective for the AIM committee was to ensure that it is a citizen led process, supervised by the City Council, but not directed by the Council. The last Land Use Plan, which now sits abandoned on a shelf, was heavily influenced by that Council; and it was unusable. Hence, I tried to avoid making the same mistake in the AIM plan.

On October 27, 2023, Council members Holman, Grant, and Schuler requested to meet with me. During that meeting they proceeded to deliver me an ultimatum to remove my appointment of your chair, or they would proceed with a resolution to remove her at the November 14, 2023, Council meeting. In that removal they would shame her. Their primary objection to her position was that she had lived in Norman only three years and didn't know the community, so it was not appropriate for her to chair the AIM Plan. I listened to their ultimatum and told the Council members I would deliver that message. When I did, as one would imagine, she was disappointed but not surprised upon hearing this. Elizabeth then informed me that she met with Council member Peacock on September 25th and Council members Nash and Grant on October 5th. Council member Grant admonished your Chair for not using racial diversity as a factor in determining her selection of Vice Chair. They told her they were "promised" by me as Mayor that their pick for vice-chair would be chosen and that is simply not accurate, I did not make that promise. The Vice-Chair is selected by the Chairperson. That Chairperson needs to select a committee member who will best help them do the work of the committee and stand as Chair in the Chair's absence. My logic for this approach was learned from the early history of our country. At that time, the Vice President was elected by the citizens, that methodology brought conflict. On June 15, 1804, the United States Congress ratified the 12th Amendment to the US Constitution construing the ballot to President and Vice President on one ticket. Why would the Council revert to the now-defunct procedure of choosing the Chair and Vice Chair separately?

Council members Grant and Schuler apparently want to insert partisan politics into a citizen and contractor-led process.

I am not a politician and therefore do not seek to hide the facts from the public. Included in this letter is an explanation of my thoughts, experiences, and reasoning about this entire Comprehensive Land Use and Transportation Plan development process to date, as well as a “defense” of your Chair, though she does not need a defense. The purpose of this letter is to engage and inform those that we serve. The City Council works for you; we are not rulers over you.

Background, Expertise, and Experience of the past Chair

Elizabeth and her husband moved to Norman nearly three years ago (January 2021) so that he could take a position as President and CEO of the Norman Economic Development Coalition (NEDC).

They purchased a home in Ward 3. Having worked together as national strategic planning consultants, they believed that following their consulting process would be beneficial, especially given the timing of the COVID 19 pandemic. Elizabeth confidentially interviewed about 165 residents; an undertaking that took well over 400 hours over 12 months. The information that was gleaned from those interviews gave her great insight into the views and opinions of a good cross section of Norman's business, civic, and activist communities. She wrote a confidential 180-page report detailing her findings and provided it to the NEDC Board. Because it's so critical of the City of Norman's then elected leadership, I understand why it was not released publicly. Judging from recent discussions with Normanites, the faces have changed on Council but the citizen's criticisms have not.

Based primarily on that report, NEDC (a coalition of public and private partners) was restructured as an urban community redevelopment agency and began to make necessary changes to the community development efforts of Norman and Cleveland County. Please note that Lawrence McKinney is one of only twelve industry professionals nationwide who have simultaneous dual certifications from both the American Chamber of Commerce Executives Association and the International Economic Development Council, as a Certified Chamber Executive (CCE) and Certified Economic Developer (CECd). On December 2, 2023, he will be recognized as one of the top 50 economic developers in the United States by the National Site Selectors Association. His primary detractors may hold advanced degrees in research and theory, but they cannot hold a candle to his impeccable real-world experience.

Here are some of the important reasons I chose Elizabeth as your Chairwoman.

- She is an entrepreneur and owns a strategic planning consulting firm, Economic Strategy Professionals LLC, focuses on communities and economic development strategic planning, including infrastructure such as roads, water, stormwater, recreation, and everything necessary to be successful – the same focus as our AIM plan. Through her professional career she helped many communities across the nation overcome conflict and stagnation and has glowing testimonials to affirm this.
- She holds an undergraduate degree from the University of Southern Mississippi and an Ed.S degree (a post-master's education specialist degree in school psychology) from the University of Northern Colorado. Notably, this degree develops professionals who can apply psychological and educational principles to improve the psychosocial environments of children (ages birth-21) and their families. I sincerely believe that a person educated in practical application (versus a research degree) is far more useful to any process, especially one such as the task at hand.
- She is a U.S. Army veteran.

- She is a board member and the VP of Resource Development for the Assistance League Norman.
- She serves on the United Way of Norman's Financial Impact Council.
- At my request and that of OU President Harroz, she helped lead the formation of Team Norman.
- One of the important findings of her report is the lack of vision found in Norman, with everyone working in silos, so she helped lead the creation of One Norman and the CiviCon National Speaker series that came out of that process. Through her leadership the partnerships between the University, City, County, and other community organizations have never been stronger. I have been involved in a multitude of meetings of varied audiences and have heard her consistently promote the need for collaboration and partnerships while also espousing a willingness to communicate, engage, and respect differences of opinions.

The contention of Council members Schuler and Grant is that she does not "know" Norman is absolutely ludicrous; she has applied great energy and an enormous amount of time working with Norman residents and businesses to understand our ethos and our desire to improve our city's quality of life. One of the primary reasons that I first considered her selection is because of the simple fact that she has not become integrated into Norman's socio-political factions. She thinks for herself; she views Norman through the lens of possibilities and improvements seen in other municipalities that could be applied to Norman as a whole. Ironically, it is laughable to believe the Councilmembers' contention that she has not lived in Norman for a "sufficient time" when the legal residency requirement for a council member is only six months! Furthermore, many citizens interviewed during the NEDC survey said that outsiders like Elizabeth are precisely what is needed to move Norman forward with vibrant, fresh ideas. Those who hold a small town, no-growth, politically myopic point of view, can't imagine the possibilities that exist in other communities becoming reality in Norman.

Councilmember Grant accused Elizabeth of being "unqualified to understand the process by which the plan was going to be developed and implemented," which is undear how Councilmember Grant, with no practical experience in planning, judged this conclusion to be accurate. However, I do understand that during Elizabeth's meeting with the Councilmember, the first question asked was whether Elizabeth attended the initial AIM Norman meeting that Elizabeth chaired in September.

Councilmember Grant stated that she believed that racism was rampant and across the state, in OKC and Tulsa especially, she insinuated that promises were made during the council retreat by the Mayor with "hope of restoring balance" which did not happen. To that point I state that my selection of committee members was made on their knowledge, skills, and abilities, not on their ethnic heritage, gender or political affiliation.

With all my heart, I fully support the ethic that Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Mike Johnson was quoted as saying *"Because all men are created equal and in the image of God, every human life has inestimable dignity and value, and every person should be measured only by the content of their character."*

Racial diversity is being touted as a concern by Councilmember Grant because she claims that Norman was "a sundowner town." When I gave council members the power to nominate members from their own districts, the names submitted by them were not diverse by ethnicity, age, or gender standards. Please contrast that with the work your Chair did in forming the ONE Norman Vision Task Force of 135 individuals. It's a highly diverse mix of 135 participants that mirrors our community demographics

precisely. This is why the private sector, and citizens such as yourselves, should lead the AIM Plan without the Council's interference. For your reference, "sundown" practice ended when Naval Air Station Norman was closed at the end of World War 2. And since no one on the City Council or on the list of those nominated for the AIM committee was alive at that time, or was consenting of, or subject to that horrible practice, her argument is fallacious, a simple attempt to shame the citizens of today's Norman for the sins of the prior residents. Hence Councilmember Grant's assertion that the practice is still active or applicable in Norman is simply untrue.

Because I have personally endured Councilmember Grant's level of hostility and aggressive, shaming tone that was now directed toward Elizabeth, a volunteer citizen simply following the consultant's process, directives, I am appalled at this bullying. It is unproductive and unprofessional, particularly when spoken by a City of Norman Councilmember. This form of speech continues to further divide our community.

Your past Chair is experienced in organizing workflows, setting goals and objectives, and monitoring production. I trusted her to complete the job because she previously completed many demanding tasks of similar complexity. I have observed her skills and expertise to collaborate and work to bring communities together. She does not have favored or long-standing personal relationships in Norman that could cloud her ability for neutrality in the process.

Furthermore, your Chair worked diligently with RDG-Garver and City Staff to gain clarity of expectations, encourage faith in process, highlight the consultant's expertise, define the path ahead, and complete the directives identified and relayed to her; all while patiently waiting for the Council to accept the organizational plan that they were undermining behind the scenes.

The process and eventual product/s are intended to be the vision of the citizens of this city, not a product of the Council's devising. The last Comprehensive Plan was subjected to heavy influence by a previous Council and was ultimately rejected. This is precisely why the citizens' input and knowledge are necessary in the development of this RDG-Garver plan, away from the political and social ideologies of this Council. RDG-Garver has consistently communicated to us that this plan is the community's plan.

After the meeting on November 8th, I strongly encouraged Elizabeth to stay involved and to continue to give her expertise to a community that so obviously needs it. At this point, I can only hope she will engage at the sub-committee level or in public meetings. As your Mayor, I promise to stay the course and shine a bright light on elected officials' intent on undermining processes that cost taxpayers and businesses time and money, nor does it instill faith in leadership.

Sincerely,

Mayor Larry Heikkila

Here is a timeline of the events and activities that occurred prior to Elizabeth's resignation -

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| Dec 2022 | After much thought and prayer, I asked Elizabeth if she would chair the Comprehensive Plan, I chose her because I trust her and I know that she is for all of Norman and our regional role with the other cities and towns in Cleveland County. I told the Council the chair will choose the vice-chair (I used the same methodologies for the Strong Towns committee that was readily accepted and approved). |
| | \$2.7 million of taxpayers' money committed to a holistic process led by expert firms RDG-Garver. Applications open for citizens to apply for the Steering Committee. |
| Jan 28, 2023 | After reviewing and analyzing all applications, as Mayor, I nominate 23 citizens to serve as Steering Committee members (based on skills, expertise, background, knowledge). |
| Feb/March 2023 | Lacking Council support to affirm my selections, I compromise and create a way for the Council to participate by allowing each council member to nominate two individuals from their Ward. Councilmember Schuler continues to insist on an individual for chair/co-chair based on race rather than knowledge, skills, and experience. |
| April/May 2023 | <u>City Council 2nd request for modifications to remove Mayor's selection of members.</u> It appears that it does not matter what structure I suggest, it will be rejected. |
| June/July 2023 | <u>City Council 3rd request for modifications, continues to refuse to confirm Mayor's nominations.</u> It appears to me that as a group, councilmembers intend to delay and block any nomination simply so that they can negate or nullify my authority to nominate. |
| August 2023 | During council retreat, I compromised and swapped three additional committee members' names and a final list of members was agreed upon, including Elizabeth as the Chair. |
| August 22, 2023 | City Council unanimously approves the resolution creating the 17 member Ad Hoc Steering committee including Elizabeth as Chair, to work with the consultant companies for AIM Norman. Partners were also approved as non-voting members. |
| Sept 21, 2023 | Chair reviews applications and selects her vice-chair based on knowledge skills and abilities. She offers and the vice-chair accepts this responsibility on Sept 22, 2023 (Again, the same process that the Strong Towns committee used). |
| Sept 25, 2023 | Councilmember Peacock meets with Elizabeth and communicates that he was under the impression that Council would be involved in the process and shared his thoughts about optics, including developers chairing sub-committees, and needing to have Councils' fingerprints on committee/subcommittees selections. Peacock recommends the same individual (referring to this position as a Co-Chair) as Councilmember Schuler asserted. In government there is no Co-President, or Co-Governor, or Co-Mayor there is a Vice President and a Lieutenant Governor, and in Norman, a Mayor Pro Temp. |
| October 5, 2023 | Councilmember Peacock chairs the Business Affairs Committee (BACA), introduces the draft One Norman vision document, prior land use goals, and priority statements, including Minneapolis' 2040 presentation documents to establish a Council Priority Framework for the AIM Norman Comp Plan. The council was encouraged to come to the October 17 meeting ready to provide staff with direction on what to include in Norman's resolution to be adopted at the October 24 th city council meeting. |
| October 10, 2023 | RDG, the City Manager, City of Norman Planning staff, met with councilmembers to discuss process, decision making and answer any questions or concerns they had. |
| October 10, 2023 | Because the AIM committee Vice-chair previously served on other community initiatives, she decides to reach out to the individual who Councilmember Grant is |

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| | proposing since her name has been brought up in multiple meetings. The Vice-chair learns that there had been no conversations with her until that very day at 11:30 am, when Councilmember Grant contacted her and asked if she would like to be the new chair of the steering committee. This is highly inappropriate and unethical since a Chair was already in place and confirmed by Council. In so doing, Councilmember Grant undermined the entire citizen-led committee process, and by nominating acted in direct conflict with Section 2-301 of the Municipal code, she has no authority to nominate, and 2-304 (b) and (c) of the Municipal code as she has no authority to appoint within the selected committee. |
| October 11, 2023 | The Vice-chair informs the Chair, consultants, and planning staff about Councilmember Grant's actions, since the second AIM Norman Steering Committee meeting was to occur that evening. |
| October 17, 2023 | During the Study Session, Councilmember Schuler introduced her desire to have a more inclusive selection process and replacement of members; mentions that she does not want to allow subcommittees to select their members. This is contrary to 2-304 (c) of the Municipal code. Councilmember Grant mentions that Councilmember Peacock is trying to interject the Minneapolis goals of equity and inclusion into the AIM Norman process. |
| October 24, 2023 | A new resolution proposed to name a replacement for a Ward 7 committee member, add parks and recreation to the master plan, add to the list of partner organizations, and clarify the process for subcommittee members. It was removed from the consent agenda by Councilmember Grant. Except for Council member Ball and I, the remaining Councilmembers vote to further delay the AIM Ad Hoc Steering committee process from moving forward. When asked why the delay, Councilmember Grant cryptically states that it is to "find a diplomatic solution." |
| October 27, 2023 | As Mayor, I am "invited" to a meeting by Councilmembers Grant, Schuler, and Holman and delivered an ultimatum to remove my choice for your Chair. Councilmember Schuler insists that another person of her choice is to become chair. Councilmember Schuler says there are other unnamed council members involved (she says she has at least five votes) and all are supposedly of the opinion that your Chairwoman "is not experienced and brings no racial diversity to the leadership role"; "She represents the interests of the Chamber and development community." |
| November 8, 2023 | After a year of patience, and undermining of Council, your Chair has resigned. |
| November 14, 2023 | Since starting this letter, further developments have occurred. During the City Council meeting of November 14 (around 1:30 am on Nov. 15) Council members Schuler and Grant nominated Chair and Co-Chair to the AIM committee. Peacock, Holman, Nash, Grant, Montoya, Schuler vote to nominate and confirm a vice-chair. 8 Partners formally resigned through written letter from the AIM committee. I made a motion to remove partners that resigned (see letter below), Council members Peacock, Holman, Schuler, Grant, Montoya voted against removing resigned partners, Nash, Mayor, and Ball voted to support motion to remove partners |
| Nov 17, 2023 | Announcement is made that the subcommittee applications will re-open. Appears intentions to modify the existing signed contract and scope of work with RDG Planning and design is occurring with council. Sub committees were supposed to begin meeting in November, yet delays in process continue. |

Below is the communication received from the partners. For context, the names of the partner organization's CEO or assigned representative were listed along with the names of individuals nominated for the steering committee on the paperwork I provided to the city staff. In the August 22nd resolution, the names of the steering committee members (voting) and names of organizations (non-voting) were approved by city council.

The resignations occurred when changes were made in the scope of work and original intention and design of the partner role on the steering committee. As we now know, although listed as non-voting members of the steering committee, they are limited in their ability to participate, share knowledge and engage during steering committee meetings.

November 14, 2023

Larry Heikkila
Mayor
City of Norman
201 West Gray Street
Norman, Oklahoma 73069

Dear Mayor Heikkila,

We sincerely appreciate you asking our organizations to serve as "non-voting Partners" on the Steering Committee for the Comprehensive Plan. However, in light of the official position of city staff that we cannot "have a seat at the table or speak during these meetings," we ask that you remove our company name from the resolution creating the Steering Committee. We are still committed to assisting when appropriate, and for those of us who have been asked to serve on sub-committees, we remain committed to doing so as individuals.

Cleveland County
Chickasaw Nation Industries
Hitachi-Vantara
Norman Economic Development Coalition
Norman Regional Health System
Sooner Centurions
Sooner Mall
Visit Norman