



## **OKC Mayor David Holt touts election reform and Thunder during Tulsa appearance**

*Randy Krehbiel, May 2, 2024* - Many factors have gone into the success Oklahoma City has enjoyed for the past 30 years.

One of them, Oklahoma City Mayor David Holt says, is the way it elects its leaders. “All of the candidates have to face all of the voters, and all of the voters get to see all of the candidates,” Holt said at a Tulsa Press Club Page One Luncheon at McNellie’s downtown on Thursday. By that, Holt essentially means some form of open primaries, either nonpartisan — which Oklahoma City’s and Tulsa’s are — or partisan but open to all voters.

Holt and others who study elections believe that open primaries incentivize coalition building and collaboration, while closed elections encourage polarization and disenfranchise large swaths of the population.

In Oklahoma, for instance, more offices are decided by party primaries — mostly Republican primaries — than by general elections.

“Today, when you’re running in party primaries, you’re trying to come to outcomes that are absolutely pure and perfect for the most extreme 20% of whichever party you’re most extreme 20% of whichever party you’re in,” Holt said. “In fact, if the other political party starts saying they kind of like an idea, you cross it off your list,” he said.

Several people affiliated with Oklahoma United, an organization dedicated to open primaries, prompted Holt to speak at some length on the matter.

“It’s a really easy choice,” he said. “If you want to see the state thrive, succeed and grow the way Oklahoma City and Tulsa have, you have to support electoral reform.”

Of course, people and parties in power aren’t keen on tinkering with a system that works for them. Holt said that shouldn’t matter. “If you think you can’t thrive (in open primaries), do better!” he exclaimed.

By aiming for the middle, Holt said, Oklahoma City leaders have been able to form “a nice coalition” that has passed a series of capital improvement projects, the most recent with more than 70% of the vote. That proposal included nearly \$1 billion to build a new downtown arena for the Oklahoma City Thunder. Taxpayer investment in sports facilities is often criticized as unproductive and unfair, but Holt said a team in the NBA, NFL or Major League Baseball is a “golden ticket to the top tier” of American cities.

“If you’re not a sports fan, I know this is hard to like, but it is what it is. American cities are to like, but it is what it is. American cities are judged by whether they have a major league American sports team,” he said.

As a young chief of staff to Mayor Mick Cornett, Holt was deeply involved in bringing the NBA team to Oklahoma City from Seattle in 2008. He says becoming a “major league city” drastically changed the city’s trajectory and contributed a great deal to its rapid growth — and in ways that are not always evident.

“I’ve seen what a difference it’s made on every level,” Holt said. “People would say we should spend the money on social services. But I don’t know that money will still be there. “There’s always this theory that there’s some mythical mid-sized city out there that’s like a social service paradise because they’re not spending all of their money on sports teams. Where is this? Is it Amarillo? Is it Wichita? Where is this city where everyone is taken care of?”

Even so, Holt said, it is “hard to make a case” for a \$1 billion arena, “especially when there are so many other needs in the community. And then, of course, people say, ‘Well, couldn’t (the team) afford to build their own arena?’ I always smiled and said, ‘What the owners could or should do is irrelevant. What they are going to do is all that matters.’ And we have to decide whether we’re going to do this.”

In his mind, the expense is worth it. “When I was voting for that arena, I was voting for homeless services. I was voting for mental health services. We are doing all of those things now, and we were not doing them in the ’80s and ’90s because we didn’t have the money for them.”