



OKLAHOMA CITY

Hometown Homage

Oklahoma City's native son transforms the urban landscape.

OKLAHOMA CITY MAYOR MICK CORNETT developed his appreciation for the city's parks and recreation amenities the old-fashioned way—by growing up competing on the ballfields, playing on the playgrounds, and relaxing under the trees offered by his neighborhood parks.

As a child, "I probably spent more time in our city parks than just about anyone in Oklahoma City," Cornett says. "There was a city park just three blocks from my house, and I played there all the time. We had the best playground in my part of the city, and when you're 7, 8, 9 years old, your part of the city is not very big. But I could ride my bike there," he reflects, which opened up all sorts of opportunities and adventures for the young boy.

Fast forward a few decades, and his esteem for parks remains, but now manifests itself in a much more influential form. As mayor of Oklahoma City since 2004, Cornett has not only made the city's parks and recreation services a priority on his own political agenda, he has also convinced the city's residents of their critical importance as well. In 2009, Oklahoma City voters approved a \$777 million city beautification referendum that centers on the installation of a new 70-acre downtown park. The MAPS-3 initiative, third in a series of Metropolitan Area Projects, will also include new and improved hiking and biking trails, senior aquatics and wellness centers, a modern streetcar system, and a new convention center, among other amenities, all of which are targeted to improve the quality of life for Oklahoma City residents.



The recently rededicated Myriad Botanical Gardens in downtown Oklahoma City is a favorite go-to spot for Mayor Cornett, who frequents the children's play area with his granddaughter.

City parks also played a major role in another of the mayor's original initiatives. In 2007, Cornett launched his "This City is Going on a Diet" campaign, which put city residents up to the collective challenge of losing one million pounds. The program's website, www.thiscityisgoingonadiet.com, prominently features local parks and often lists local fitness opportunities offered at the different locations. By January 2012, more than 47,000 participating citizens broke the one-million-pound mark and have continued to maintain the trend of healthy lifestyles.

The success of programs like MwAPS-3 and This City is Going on a Diet can't be attributed solely to the mayor's efforts, however. His close working relationship with Wendel Whisenhunt, Oklahoma City's director of parks and recreation, ensures the continued prominence of park benefits in the public eye. Whisenhunt has also come up with a number of innovative ideas for parks and recreation, all of which have paid off handsomely, says Cornett.

"Every time Wendel has led us down a road, he's been right every time," Cornett notes. "And we don't necessarily make it easy on him—we



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go through ups and downs and economic cycles like everybody else—But Wendel does a lot with what he has to work with, and of course what we offer today is amongst the best of American cities."

In turn, Whisenhunt highlights the role Cornett has played in both the continued public support of parks and recreation and the ever-improving well-being of the city as a whole.

"[Cornett] has been a real proponent of all quality-of-life issues," says Whisenhunt, "and in a city organization, a lot of those

quality-of-life issues are addressed by the parks and rec department. He's been a real advocate for proper funding in our budgets so that we have the funds to offer the programs and the operations that are necessary to be successful."

Drawing on his extensive background in media, advertising, and marketing, Cornett has tirelessly promoted his city in his eight years as mayor, and with good reason: During the recession, Oklahoma City has sustained one of the strongest economies and among the lowest unemployment rates in the nation. Even more impressive, Cornett has been able to implement more than a billion dollars in local infrastructure projects without once raising

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Downtown Oklahoma City features a number of popular green spaces including Myriad Botanical Gardens, Bricktown Canal, River Walk, and the Chesapeake Boathouse.

taxes in his eight-year term as mayor, thanks to expiring taxes and continued support from local voters.

Only a few short decades ago, Cornett remembers when young people left Oklahoma City in droves, looking for greener pastures. Today, largely because of the increased presence of public, quality-of-life amenities like parks and recreation, locals are staying, and young people are moving in from out of state. Furthermore, area residents who don't live within the city limits have also become actively engaged in the well-being of Oklahoma City and have been willing to invest in its continued progress.

"One reason we've succeeded," says Cornett, "is that we've convinced the suburbanite that the vitality of the core is directly related to the

quality of life in the suburbs. For that reason, they've been willing to tax themselves for amenities downtown."

With a greener landscape, a thriving economy, a more healthy and active constituency, and promises of exciting things to come, Oklahoma City is clearly doing very well under the supervision of Mayor Cornett. "I think our entire generation is proud of all of the improvements we've made, all of the parks that we've built, all of the green spaces we have created and are creating," says Cornett. "Our people believe in investing in infrastructure and investing in their city, and at this point the city has developed somewhat of a track record of being able to deliver." *

Interview by **Danielle Taylor**, Associate Editor, *Parks & Recreation* (dtaylor@nrpa.org).

AGENCY VIEW

Oklahoma City Parks and Recreation

Population: 591,967

Resources: 154 parks, 25 recreation centers, two senior centers, one performing arts recreation center, two community gymnasiums, two botanical gardens, two nature parks, eight golf courses, three lake recreation areas, nine park ponds, two tennis centers, 74 tennis courts, two dog parks, one performing arts facility, three skateparks, one ice skating rink, 182 ball fields, 87 basketball hoops, 75 miles of trails and greenways, 25 miles of in-park walking paths, three disc golf courses, one indoor and four outdoor pools, 17 spraygrounds, one municipal fish hatchery.

Budget: FY 2013 \$30.3 million

Staff: 172 full-time

Sixteen years ago, when Wendel

Whisenhunt took the reins of Oklahoma City's parks and recreation department, exciting changes were in the works. In the 21 years prior, no bond initiatives had been passed to improve the city's parks system, but one finally came through in 1995. Since then, two more capital improvement bond packages for parks have been approved, and the parks department has used this public trust to provide a number of new and improved services and amenities. For example, more than 100 new playgrounds have been built in Oklahoma City since 1995.

"I think our greatest strengths are surrounded by the confidence the public seems to have in city government here," Whisenhunt says. "We feel supported by



Prior to becoming Oklahoma City's director of parks and recreation, Wendel Whisenhunt operated in every division of his department and understands the needs and capabilities throughout.

the citizens of Oklahoma City. We're determined to satisfy the citizens with the work the bond issues are doing for them in their parks, and hope that we can do so so they'll continue to feel encouraged about approving additional bond issues in the future."

Whisenhunt also looks to the role parks play in attracting tourism to Oklahoma City, and he's extremely excited about the promises of the upcoming downtown park. "When this park is finished," he says, "it's going to say to a large extent that Oklahoma City has really arrived." *