

# The 'Walk' to Health, Wellness and Economic Stability in Oklahoma City

By Renee Weeks | Photos by Georgia Read/Read Studio, Inc.

**W**hen the average person thinks of Oklahoma City—what comes to mind? For some, it might be a whole lot of “flat” and for others it might be “oil fields.” Some people may think, “Wasn’t there some guy on CBS Morning News talking about Oklahoma City recently?” And, they would be right.

The former Mayor, Mick Cornett, appeared on CBS This Morning in January of this year to discuss the Oklahoma City health and infrastructure in the city. Why, you wonder, would this be of any interest?

Let’s step back in time for a moment to 2007. Mayor Cornett

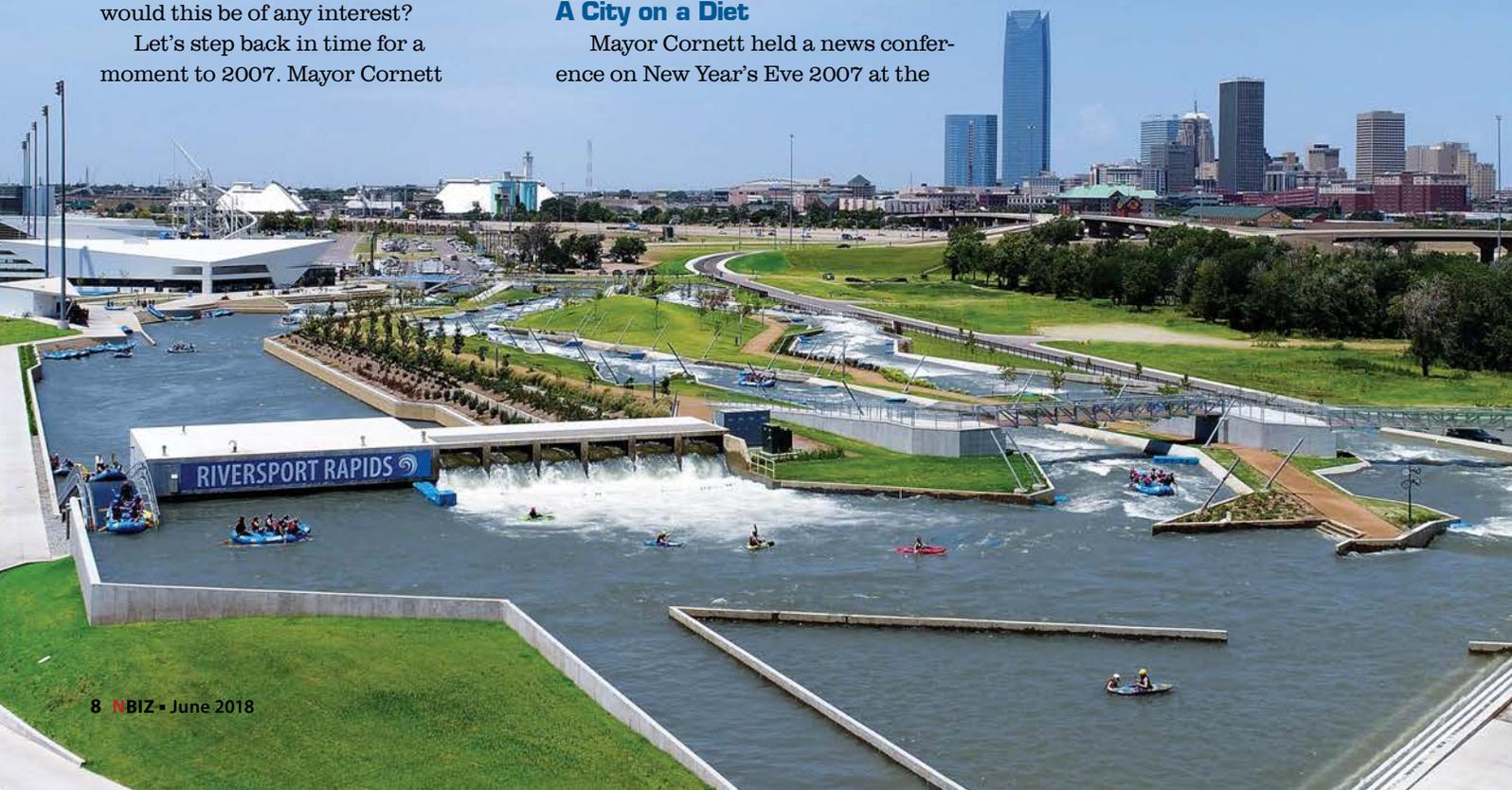
happened across an issue of Men’s Fitness and began flipping through hoping to find some tips. Instead, he noticed a list of rankings of America’s fattest cities. Number eight on that list was Oklahoma City. He was shocked and appalled. How could this be? The Mayor himself had recently discovered he was considered “obese” by health standards because he was 40 pounds overweight. How had he reached this weight, and if he had put on pounds, then was this occurring throughout Oklahoma City as well?

## A City on a Diet

Mayor Cornett held a news conference on New Year’s Eve 2007 at the

city zoo and made an announcement: He was putting Oklahoma City on a diet, including himself. He challenged the city residents to look more like ferrets and less like elephants!

A website was created to track the city’s progress and soon individuals were signing up as well as corporations on behalf of their employees. The goal was set to lose a total of 1,000,000 pounds citywide. How was this going to happen? How are people’s behaviors changed? He did not want to wage war on fast food restaurants, although



Oklahoma City had the distinction of being the “Fast-food capital of America” in 2007. Mayor Cornett’s anti-obesity campaign soon took off. Among the events were weight-loss contests, new food items on restaurants’ menus that consisted of healthy food items, such as “the mayor’s special,” as well as other promotional media events to promote healthy choices. The mayor realized he could not prevent people from visiting fast food restaurants, however, maybe he could influence their food choices at those restaurants.

Soon, residents of Oklahoma City were reporting weight loss on the website on a regular basis. Five years later, in January 2012, the city hit the mayor’s million-pound target weight loss. This was a fantastic achievement. Not only had awareness been raised concerning healthy-eating across the city, but also, the mayor had personally lost 40 pounds! Now what? Would the residents of Oklahoma City keep the weight off? Reduced calorie-intake was a critical element of this weight-loss success, however, what else was contributing to the problem?

## The Infrastructure Changes

Oklahoma City has always been a sprawling place since back in the land-grabbing days of 1889 when settlers raced to stake out their land at the sound of a gunshot. Since then, Oklahoma City had become a crisscross of multi-lane freeways and highways with automobile use at its center. There were no sidewalks to speak of and most people drove everywhere they needed to go. The culture and infrastructure of Oklahoma City were key elements in maintaining the momentum of improved health of the city’s residents. If people move more, people tend to weigh less. The right environment provides positive influences on human behavior. Therefore, Mayor Cornett set about changing the “built” environment of Oklahoma City.

In order to fund changes to the city’s infrastructure, Mayor Cornett and the city had to be “creative” regarding obtaining the necessary dollars for those changes. A MAPS (Metropolitan Area Projects) program

had been started about 25 years earlier. Mayor Cornett used this concept to initiate a MAPS3 Project that implemented a penny on the dollar sales tax to fund infrastructural projects to promote health and wellness within the city. The residents voted and the one cent rise on the local sales tax passed. Additional funding came from

tobacco settlements and from rising property tax income paid by companies and people who were attracted back to Oklahoma City due to all the changes being made. Because of the money raised by MAPS3, none of the projects required federal funding, although the city did receive some additional monies from the federal government as well.

## What did Mayor Cornett and Oklahoma City do with the money raised? Plenty!

The makeover of the city is remarkable, to say the very least. The single most amazing part of the makeover is found just a few minutes' walk from the entertainment district of Bricktown. It is a world-class rowing facility known as the "Boathouse District" consisting of a 3-mile stretch of water, complete with landscaping, boathouses, bike lanes and floodlights. Michael Knopp, Executive Director of the Oklahoma City Community Foundation, is credited with inspiring the emergence of this phenomenal series of recreational facilities. Knopp started his career as a first prosecutor with the district attorney's office, and then as an attorney at the Federal Aviation Administration, both of which seem a far cry from rowing! Knopp grew up

with a love of fishing having once lived in the Land of 10,000 Lakes (Minnesota) and grew that love for the water into the sport of rowing in college.

Knopp discussed the beginnings of the Boathouse District in an interview with me recently. He stated the capital investment for the Boathouse District project totaled over \$100 million with funds that were obtained from a private and public partnership. The first boathouse was built in 2006 with the entire project taking 12 years to complete. Although the community of Oklahoma City embraced the project, as with all projects, there were a few challenges along the way. Knopp pointed out that because this was a "different and unique" project, which included not only the actual land on which the boathouses were constructed—having been oilfields at one time—but also,

the boathouses themselves were of a unique architectural design.

Knopp further discussed the transformation of the "ditch" that became what is now known as "Riversport Rapids." The cost of this phenomenal transformation came to \$53 million. These river rapids have since become the training ground for Olympic rowing, canoe and kayak teams beginning in 2009. However, the rapids are not just for rowing's best, they are also open to families, school parties and even senior citizens who can be seen enjoying the sport. Although the Boathouse District remains open year-round, the "whitewater" Riversport Rapids is open from March – October. Knopp estimated that approximately 350,000 visitors of a broad demographic range make use of the this "world-class" venue each year.

Knopp explained that the Boathouse District is a non-profit organization funded by operations revenue earned from visitors' passes in addition to fund-raising and sponsorships received from individuals and businesses.

Besides the popular river rapids and boathouses, other initiatives were created using the MAPS3 initiative funds. Parks, sidewalks and landscaped walking trails sprang to life. On-street parking became a reality. Sports facilities were constructed for public use.



Join the outdoor excitement of white-water rafting, tubing, kayaking plus land adventures!

## The Economic Impact on Oklahoma City

What has been the economic impact on Oklahoma City from this and other MAPS initiatives? I spoke with Roy Williams, CEO of Greater Oklahoma City Chamber Economic Development, who provided valuable insight. First, Williams turned back the pages of history to the original MAPS initiative, which began in 1993, when voters approved a MAPS temporary one-cent sales tax to finance capital projects to enhance Oklahoma City. A second MAPS initiative was passed in 2001 entitled MAPS for Kids for another temporary one-cent sales tax increase for school facility improvements. MAPS3, which is the capital improvements program passed in 2009, has made the Oklahoma River

improvements, including the Riversport Rapids whitewater rafting and kayaking center, a reality.

I asked Mr. Williams, "What were the drivers of these MAPS initiatives?" Williams again went back in time to about 25 years ago in Oklahoma City. Oklahoma City's economy was failing and was viewed as an undesirable place in which to live primarily due to its lack of quality of life. Citizens of Oklahoma City, as well as businesses, were leaving. This philosophy needed to change for the city to not only thrive, but also to survive!

That philosophy was indeed changed to one of "investing" in the city itself to create an environment that would attract corporations and individuals alike to the community. These public MAPS-funded investments made that possible.

One of the first major corporations to establish a foothold in Oklahoma City was Dell, which settled its presence on the Oklahoma River about 15 years ago. Williams acknowledged, "Dell would not have opened a facility here unless the infrastructural changes had occurred." Since then, the list of major corporations who have located to Oklahoma City includes Devon Energy, Boeing, AT&T, UPS, Hertz, Sonic, American Fidelity and the list goes on



**"...approximately  
350,000 visitors of  
a broad demographic  
range make use of the  
this "world-class" venue  
each year."**

and on. Adding to that list are several bioscience and aerospace corporations as well. All of this would not be possible unless these corporations had access to talent. That is what Oklahoma City now has, and plenty of it, according to Williams. The city has approximately 130,000 college graduates annually and they are retaining most of them because the city now has the employment opportunities that they are seeking. Williams asserted that Oklahoma City

has a "net-positive in-migration" instead of an "out-migration" of people regarding the surrounding states of Texas, Arkansas and Kansas. Obviously, it is a "win-win" situation for Oklahoma City, its residents and its businesses!

According to Williams, five billion dollars has been infused into the Oklahoma City economy in other projects because of the MAPS initiatives, which, in turn, have fueled private investments. He pointed out that WalletHub, the website that offers financial fitness information, rated Oklahoma City the "7<sup>th</sup> Most Economically Diverse" city in the U.S. It comes as no surprise that Oklahoma City's fastest growing industry is the hospitality industry due to the Riversport Rapids infrastructure. No longer is Oklahoma City a city whose sole source of revenue is "oil and gas" and, in fact, only three percent of its economy now involves that industry. An economic analysis is currently being conducted to provide additional statistical data on Oklahoma City's scope of industries.

Dozens of representatives from cities all around the U.S. have come to Oklahoma City to study its economic environment in the hope of emulating it back home. As Williams pointed out, "It is one thing to achieve such an economy, but another to sustain it

in the long-term.” Oklahoma City has, obviously, discovered that secret since it has been doing so for over 25 years!

### What Lies Ahead

Mick Cornett has since moved on from the mayorship of Oklahoma City and is a Republican candidate for governor of Oklahoma in the upcoming November 2018 election. Mayor David Holt was elected February 13, 2018, with the largest vote percentage achieved by a non-incumbent candidate for Mayor since 1947.

What are Mayor Holt’s plans for Oklahoma City now that the torch has been passed to him? According to the official Oklahoma City website, he believes that although Oklahoma City has come so far, so fast, work still needs to be done and the momentum must not be lost. Most notably, his vision for the city includes maintaining improvements in streets, transit and infrastructure as well as sustaining commitment to improving the quality of life through MAPS and other initiatives.

And, what about Mick Cornett’s bid for the governorship? What is his vision for the State of Oklahoma? Mr. Cornett’s campaign website states his vision is one of a “new” direction for Oklahoma, one of a “different course with different leaders”. His plan for accomplishing this includes making a priority of health in the State. He believes that health and wellness must be a priority to reduce medical costs and to improve the quality of life. He already did this by emphasizing individual responsibility and improving the “built” environment in Oklahoma City. If elected, he wants to create a state that will attract top-notch doctors and medical care to all residents whether urban or rural.

Will the progress in Oklahoma City that was achieved through MAPS3 under the direction of former Mayor Cornett be continued by the newly-elected Mayor Holt? Or, will it be simply “maintained” as is with little momentum? Much has been done, however, as Mayor Holt stated on the OKC (Oklahoma City) website, “our work is not finished yet”.

Only time will tell what will happen in Oklahoma City as well as during the

November gubernatorial election. One thing of which we can be sure, however, is that Oklahoma City has indeed come along way on its “walk to health, wellness and economic stability!” I, for one, can’t wait to see the next chapter! How about you? **N**

*Renee Weeks is a faculty member of National University located in*

*La Jolla, CA as well as City University of Seattle and American Business and Technical University of St. Joseph, MO having earned her MBA from the University of Wisconsin. Professor Weeks is also a business professional with experience in both the private and public sectors. Her areas of expertise include strategic planning, fiscal management and leadership.*