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# City Planner Sees Interesting Future for Downtown Tulsa

BY CHARLES CANTRELL  
*Associate Editor*



*JACK CROWLEY: Nationally prominent city planner Jack Crowley is interested on how prime parcels of downtown real estate can be incorporated into a master plan for mixed-use development in the inner city.*

CHARLES CANTRELL for GTR Newspapers

Where others see urban blight, John F. (Jack) Crowley sees possibilities and promise. Tracing Crowley's carrier path provides evidence of why he was the solid choice to advise Mayor Taylor and city planners on the best way to move downtown Tulsa's redevelopment efforts to the next level.

Crowley was born on a Connecticut dairy farm. He started his college career at the University of Detroit. It was 1965 and a lack of money and grades cost him a draft notice. He opted for four years instead of two and became an Arabic interpreter before coming to Oklahoma's Fort

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Sill in 1967 to earn a commission as a field artillery officer. It was there he also met his wife of 38 years at the urging of his future mother-in-law. It should be noted that Lawton mothers with young daughters were reluctant matchmakers when it came to the mostly thought of vagabond occupants of Fort Sill. One can only conclude Crowley must have made a good impression.

After military service he wasted no time in continuing his undergraduate studies at the nearest college he could find, which was the University of Oklahoma. He finished up there with a B.A. in Art History, a Masters of Regional and City Planning and a Ph.D. in Urban Geography with research in urban hydrology. Armed with these academic credentials, he entered into his career field and completed stints in various community planning and development roles around the state including becoming Chief Planner for State Parks in 1974 before becoming a Design Professor at the University of Georgia.

In 1978 he applied for and was invited to Tulsa to head up Tulsa Metro Planning Commission, an entity that would all too soon merge with Indian Nation Council Of Governments (INCOG).

The merger, though arguably good for the area, left Crowley unemployed. But as good fortune would have it, in stepped Williams Reality, a newly formed subsidiary of Williams Companies with the perfect answer to an urban planner's dream job. In the 1970s the city's downtown was in the throes of a massive revitalization stemming from an influx of federally funded urban renewal money under the Model Cities program along with local private funding.

One result of this period of downtown renewal is the iconic Williams Center Tower, the "crown jewel" of the city's evolving skyline. Williams Reality also became planners and implementers of other large urban renewal projects around the country in cities like Denver, San Antonio, Charlotte and Kansas City. Crowley's experience and success in Tulsa positioned him well to help guide these large projects under the Williams Reality banner.

Over the years in various capacities Crowley has played a vital role in many major developments in the city. He was an early advocate for Tulsa's innovative flood management system that became the model for flood-hazard mitigation plans nationally. He also served as Director of Oklahoma Department of Transportation under Governor David Walters. With decades of urban development experience and a wealth of knowledge regarding the interworkings and infrastructure of Tulsa, the city's man with a plan is at it again.

The opening of the BOK Center, construction underway on Oneok Field and the many commercial and residential projects springing up in the downtown area are creating a synergism of urban development opportunities. To get out ahead of the revitalization of downtown in order to optimize available land use and infill development with a more comprehensive plan for the inner city area, City Hall called on Crowley to “connect the downtown development dots.”

“Downtown belongs to everyone,” says Crowley. “And consequently everyone has a stake in how we go forth creating a vibrant, economically sustainable inner city that adapts to what the future holds: an inner city that continues to be the cultural and economic engine for the region.”

As an incentive to directing and spurring urban development, the most powerful infrastructure element, according to Crowley, is “fixed guide-way transportation.”

Crowley says, “Higher density development follows transportation that is permanently established such as a light rail or mass transit. Where it goes, development goes, population density grows and real estate values increase. But the city needs a comprehensive plan on how to best achieve the optimum benefit we are beginning to realize from initial investments in the downtown area. This is what Mayor Taylor and City Hall have asked me to do.”

And do it he has. After months of study and analysis, a plan is emerging that identifies certain parcels of land in the inner city that are ripe for mixed-use development and connects them with a light rail system. One promising segment is the property just on the northeast fringe of downtown where old structures once housing Fintube and Evans Electric still stand overlooking Tulsa’s skyline. The property is owned by the city and is a perfect location for sustainable infill development that could include multiunit residential, commercial, business and other type development. It would connect to other inner city modules of infill development by light rail (see map accompanying article).

According to Crowley, compelling economic factors are affecting the future of urban transportation. An example being if it takes \$250 million to build five miles of two lanes of expressways and it takes \$150 million to build five miles of light rail that in turn lessens the need for expanding expressways, it’s not a hard choice to make. Adding to the economic incentive, research shows the younger generation entering the workforce is very amenable to mass transit. It would seem fixed guide-way

transportation systems are a likely component of future urban development and inner city revitalization. And that would include Tulsa.

But changing a typical Midwestern metropolitan city from a suburb commuting, car-centered culture to one that is willing to invest in more energy efficient and sustainable life style concepts is hard. Old habits are hard to break. Is Tulsa ready to make the change?

Crowley thinks the city is already embarked on changing as witnessed by what he calls the “organic” infill growth underway in the Brookside and Cherry Street corridors. The addition of multiple unit residential dwellings mixing with commercial and small business is increasing the population density in these areas. The results are continued appreciation of real estate values and increased commerce generating more tax revenue for the city coffers. This provides City Hall with the means to better maintain and meet the needs of the city. This type of urban development is the wave of the future when it comes to inner city urban revitalization.

“All we need to do is get out ahead of what is already underway and make sure we have a master plan that guides and optimizes the results,” says Tulsa’s man with a plan.

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