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MAPS projects may link suburbs

WILLIAM F. O'BRIEN
The Edmond Sun

EDMOND — Central Park is situated in the middle of the island of Manhattan and serves as a place where all New Yorkers can enjoy the beauty of nature and also engage in a variety of recreational activities. It was designed by Frederick Law Olmsted in the 19th century to provide a place where New Yorkers could escape the concrete and asphalt of urban life.

The Oklahoma City area may have a similar oasis if the new MAPS 3 plan is approved by its citizenry in December. That program, which recently was unveiled by Oklahoma City Mayor Mick Cornett, would create a 70-acre park in what is now a blighted area in the middle of Oklahoma City that would be situated between the Oklahoma River and the downtown area. The projects would be financed by continuing the 1-cent sales tax that was put in place by the previous MAPS project now scheduled to expire in April. The extended tax would be in effect for seven years if it is approved by the Oklahoma City electorate.

There are seven other projects that are part of that package. They include improvements to the Oklahoma River that would entail the construction of a boathouse for kayaks on that waterway, a new convention center, and an additional 57 miles of bicycle and walking trails in the city. But the project that may have the most impact on the Oklahoma City area's future is the one that would construct a commuter rail system in the downtown area. Many cities have constructed such systems in recent years, and some civic leaders have been urging Oklahoma City to follow suit.

Washington Post columnist Neal Pierce has written of how mass transit systems will play an important role in American urban life in the future by linking cities to their suburbs in an environmentally friendly way. Pierce believes that cities that do not have mass transit systems in place will not be able to prosper in the 21st century. And it is thought that a downtown Oklahoma City light rail system could in time be expanded to provide rail service to Midwest City, Norman and Edmond.

The Obama administration recently has proposed the construction of a high-speed national railway system that would connect Oklahoma City to Dallas and to Denver, and a light rail system could be linked to it.

The first MAPS program resulted in the transformation of what is now the Oklahoma River from a creek that needed to be mowed three times a year to a viable waterway that hosts events that brings hundreds of people to its banks on an annual basis. It also produced the Bricktown Canal, and improvements to the Oklahoma City school system.

The second one was responsible for the construction of the Ronald Norick Downtown Library as well as improvements to sports facilities and other structures in the downtown area.

The success of the MAPS projects has resulted in other communities in Oklahoma, including Altus, to adopt similar programs in which an increase in the sales tax is used to fund a variety of specified civic improvements. Recently, an attorney and civic leader in Edmond proposed what he described as a MAPS project for Edmond's downtown area.

It was said that the proudest boast of the Roman Emperor Augustus Caesar was that he found Rome a city of brick and left it a city of marble. And it may be said of the current generation of Oklahoma City leaders that they transformed Oklahoma City into a world-class city by persuading the voters of Oklahoma City to approve a series of MAPS projects.

WILLIAM F. O'BRIEN is an Oklahoma City attorney.



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