Oklahoma City mayor will bring his local-option tax talk to Boise, Meridian

By: Teya Vitu  January 28, 2016  0

Oklahoma City has redefined its downtown and overall city with a one-cent, local-option sales tax over the past two decades, building a downtown baseball stadium, dozens of new schools, a downtown library and the groundwork to revitalize a warehouse district into the entertainment-shopping Bricktown district.

Three phases of Metropolitan Area Projects (MAPS) programs since 1993 used the local-option sales tax to fund some $2 billion in “quality-of-life” improvements – in the words of four-term Oklahoma City Mayor Mick Cornett – that generated $6 billion in private sector investment.

Cornett will be in Boise and Meridian Feb. 4-5 to tout the merits of the local option sales tax with the tagline: “Creating Cities Where People Want to Live.” Cornett will speak at 6 p.m. Feb. 4 on the 17th floor of the Eighth and Main Tower in downtown Boise and at 9 a.m. Feb. 5 at the COMPASS Board Room, 700 NE 2nd Street, in Meridian.

The presentations are free but space is limited. RSVP to ctorkelson@compassidaho.org.

The Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho invited Cornett to Boise to reinforce the COMPASS board of directors’ “strong support” for local options sales tax legislation in Idaho.

Local-option taxes are illegal in Idaho cities, except in resort cities with less than 10,000 residents, where 13 resort towns have won the necessary 60 percent public vote to impose them.

"Such a tool will provide local units of government the ability to request necessary supplemental infrastructure revenue for specific projects, as approved by local voters, through a local sales tax,” the COMPASS Board wrote in its 2016 state legislative position statement. “Local option sales tax can provide a tool for local units of government to address local transportation challenges.”

The COMPASS Board has 10 mayors among its 31 voting directors, including Boise Mayor David Bieter.

"We want to create a first-class public transportation system,” Bieter spokesman Mike Journee said. “Absent a tool like a local option tax that can be and would be very difficult.”

Boise leaders met Cornett and got a first-hand look at the result of the MAPS programs during an October 2012 Oklahoma City visit organized by the Boise Metro Chamber of Commerce. This involved 21 people including the Boise and Meridian mayors and representatives from Valley Regional Transit, Greater Boise Auditorium District, the Downtown Boise Association, COMPASS, the Boise Public Library, Northern Nazarene University, Intermountain Gas, the Oppenheimer Companies and CSHQA.

"We were fascinated with all they are doing,” said Ray Stark, the chamber’s senior vice president. "You pay cash for the projects. You don't bond. This Mayor Cornett is a mover and shaker. He says, 'you build projects that improve the lifestyle of your city.' They came up with crazy ideas that worked.”

Two such ideas are a RIVERPORT Rapids that will host the Olympic trials for the U.S. whitewater rafting and kayaking teams and a Bricktown Canal similar to the San Antonio River Walk, which has boat rides, pedestrian paths and dozens of restaurants and shopping opportunities along a canal.

The original voter-approved MAPS in 1993 raised $309 million over 5½ years that built the Chickasaw Bricktown Ballpark for the AAA baseball team, a new downtown library, the Bricktown Canal, the Chesapeake Energy Arena that lured the NBA basketball team from Seattle to Oklahoma City and also largely rebuilt the Civic Center Music Hall.
The second round, a $700 million MAPS for Kids from 2001, built or renovated more than 70 schools in Oklahoma City and 23 suburban school districts.

The existing MAPS 3 was launched in 2010, and the local option sales tax is expected to raise $777 million by the time it expires in 2017. MAPS 3 will build a new convention center, a modern streetcar system, four senior health and wellness centers, and a downtown public park, and will make Oklahoma River improvements.

"We want to hear about the success and challenges, what worked and what didn't work," COMPASS Communication Coordinator Amy Luft said. "How has the public accepted the program?"

The Cornett talks is part of a COMPASS education series.

The local option tax has been discussed for decades in Idaho. The Legislature has approved it only for resort towns and auditorium districts, which can only impose lodging taxes.

"It's a tool we need," Journee said.

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ABOUT TEYA VITU

Teya Vitu is an Idaho Business Review reporter, covering commercial real estate, construction, transportation and whatever else may intrigue him in the moment.