

Comprehensive City Plan Analysis: Norman, Oklahoma

Alison Holderbaum

University of Oklahoma

RCPL 5063: Planning with Diverse Communities

Dr. John Harris

I chose to look at the comprehensive plan for Norman, Oklahoma. The plan (*Norman 2025 Plan*, n.d.) was adopted in 2005 and is a 20-year plan intended to guide Norman through the year 2025. The document serves as a plan for both land use and transportation. When the plan was written in 2005, there was not a focus on diversity as there is now. Parts of the plan were designed in collaboration with the Gibbs College of Architecture. With the college's focus on diversity and the creation of the "Planning Diverse with Communities" course, it would make sense for the City of Norman to work alongside the University of Oklahoma again while creating the next iteration of the plan. Since the next plan will likely lead Norman into the year 2045, I hope it will mention diversity and specific communities in more detail.

While the comprehensive plan for Norman does not show the demographics of the city, it is important to look at who is most likely to live in Norman and their specific needs. Norman is the third largest city in the state of Oklahoma and is part of the Oklahoma City metropolitan area. The population of Norman is currently around 125,000 according to both the United States Census Bureau (*U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts*, n.d.) and data from the City of Norman (*Infographic for Mitchell & Cinthya (3).Pdf*, n.d.). The comprehensive plan estimated that the population of Norman would be around 137,00 by 2025. While the city did not grow as much as expected, the comprehensive plan was designed to guide Norman through this population growth. Norman is about 75% white with each other recorded race making up less than 10% of the city's population. The median age in Norman is 32.3 years but there is a significant amount of 20 to 24-year-olds due to the University of Oklahoma. However, some of the data for students attending OU may not be accurately presented in census data. Even if they are not represented in

official demographics for the city of Norman, it is still important to note that the students at the University of Oklahoma will be impacted by the concepts outlined in the comprehensive plan.

Planning with the Disabled

By one estimate (Ian C. Langtree, 2017), approximately 13.3% of the population of the city of Norman is disabled. This means over 15,000 people with disabilities are living in Norman. This portion of the population might be more directly impacted by city planning than other groups. As an able-bodied person, it will not impact my everyday life if ADA-compliant curb ramps are missing. However, this could be catastrophic to those with disabilities as it could prevent them from being able to access basic human necessities. One big way that the City of Norman could help people with disabilities is by improving public transportation. The comprehensive city plan outlines transportation planning and mentions the city's bus system. While there is public transportation available in Norman, it could be improved significantly. The central area of the city has decent coverage by embark routes, but those who live further out are underserved.

While this mainly focuses on transportation access for those with physical disabilities, we need to ensure that everyone can access the resources they need. As the city goes through the creation of the next comprehensive plan, it is important to create an environment that allows everyone to participate in the planning process. Public meetings need to be accessible to allow citizens to have an opportunity to engage with city planners and bring important issues to the attention of city officials. Once the city plan is released, it is important to create a document that is accessible to everyone.

Having access to reliable public transportation can make it significantly easier for those with disabilities to be able to get to what they need to survive. For example, one of my former

friends attended OU but lived on the other side of Norman. He has a disability that makes it hard for him to walk and unable to drive. Due to this and the fact that buses did not run close to his house, he had to rely on others for rides every day to get to campus or work. Norman is not a walkable city and the way the current bus routes are set up makes it hard to get where you need to go. Even though there are buses that run to and from the University of Oklahoma campus, this did not help my friend because he still had to walk at least a mile to get to the nearest bus stop. This problem was significantly worsened by the fact that the three closest bus stops were retired, causing the closest bus stop to go from being half a mile away to almost one and a half miles (*Transit Bus Operations*, n.d.). This increase made it even more impractical for him to be able to use public transportation. While Embark Norman offers ADA paratransit (*EMBARC Oklahoma City*, n.d.), the information is hard to find and not clear on what is offered. To make the City of Norman more accessible for those with disabilities, the transportation section of the next comprehensive plan needs to work to make public transportation safer and more accessible for the disabled.

One of the biggest complaints that people with disabilities have with public transportation is the way they are treated by bus drivers and other passengers. While some of this is due to the prejudices of individual bus drivers, systemic change is needed to create a safer, more comfortable public transportation system. In one study in Australia, many of the survey participants had been discriminated against by bus drivers and felt that they were not treated as people. While bus drivers are expected to stick to schedules in order to ensure riders are picked up and dropped off at the correct time, many drivers do not wait long enough for disabled riders to be ready before departing stops. This along with a tendency to not “brake, corner, and accelerate appropriately” (Das Neves et al., 2023) can cause disabled riders to be injured. One

wheelchair user reported being injured due to a lack of care from the driver. “The bus driver went too fast. The first time I fell over in my wheelchair on the bus. I hit the seat...then the other time at the same corner, going back home, three days later, I fell over and I kiss the floor...I’ve had problems with my hips ever since” (Das Neves et al., 2023). The injuries that stemmed from this incident may make it even harder for the survey participant to ride public transportation and could even impact other parts of their everyday life.

Paratransit, separate bus routes that pick up disabled riders from specific locations such as their home or workplace, are intended to alleviate some of the issues that come with traditional bus routes. However, this is not always true as paratransit creates unique problems. One report from a frequent rider of the New York City paratransit service highlights these issues. Britney Wilson explains how the paratransit system works and the flaws that it has. Some of these flaws come directly from the way paratransit systems are set up. Since the buses do not run on regular routes and pick up riders from varying locations, it is hard for riders to predict how long it will take for them to get to their destination. Wilson’s commute to and from work would only take 45 minutes if she had access to a car but frequently takes at least 2 hours using paratransit (Wilson, 2020). This is due to the shared nature of paratransit. Riders have to make appointments for the time they need to be picked up and routes are made based on these appointments rather than what is geographically the most efficient. Paratransit riders may go past their destination before they are able to be dropped off. The unpredictability of paratransit routes ties back to the theme created by survey participants in the Neves article that the time of disabled riders needs to be respected. There is not much information about the paratransit services offered in Norman but it can be expected that they would be similar to what is offered in New York City

albeit on a much smaller scale. They could be improved by being more transparent about what is offered as well as being more aware of the needs of its users.

More specifically, the next iteration of the comprehensive city plan of the city of Norman needs to highlight what is being done to help disabled citizens. The public transportation section needs to talk about the availability of paratransit routes as well as the fact that there are portions of Norman that are significantly underserved by public transportation. While there are barriers to fixing these problems, the city plan at least needs to acknowledge that they exist. In the more general portion of the plan, the needs of those with disabilities needs to be mentioned. In the current version of the plan, the only mention of those with disabilities is that “parks and recreational facilities” (Norman 2025 Plan, page 10) need to meet their needs. While this is true, there are more aspects of the city that need to be modified to meet the needs of everyone in the city of Norman not just those who are disabled.

Planning with women

Some features that make the built environment more accessible for people with disabilities also make it easier for parents to navigate the world with a stroller. Operating buses that are wheelchair accessible will also make it easier for parents to get strollers onto the bus without having to fold or lift them. While not all women are mothers and will need to navigate Norman with children, there are some issues that most women are going to face. One concern that many women have is about the safety of public transportation. These worries are different from the issues that people with disabilities have with public transportation and often cannot be fixed using the same solutions. Many women worry about sexual harassment on public transportation and the fact that they do not know who else is going to be on the bus with them. They are also worried about using public transportation at night due to the fact that “things might

not be seen by others to intervene” (*Cities Alive*, n.d.). There are a few possible solutions to help women feel more comfortable using public transportation. While some areas offer women-only subway cars or similar solutions, this would not work with the current public transportation system or the needs of the city of Norman. To help women feel safer, bus stops need to have better lighting to provide greater visibility and improve safety while waiting for the bus. The University of Oklahoma implements blue emergency police call buttons around campus that make students feel safer in case of an emergency. These buttons or something similar could also be implemented at bus stops to provide an extra layer of protection for both women waiting alone for the bus at night and anyone else who may have an emergency. Norman has a large population of college students and young professionals. Many of these may be women who want or need to be able to reach more of the city while not having access to a personal car. Adding improvements to public transportation safety to the city plan would help show women that their safety is important in the city of Norman and that there will be improvements made in the future.

While it is important that public transportation works for everyone, that is not the only place that women in Norman may feel unsafe. The “Women of Northeast Oklahoma City Photovoice Project” looked at the concerns of African American women living in nearby Northeast Oklahoma City. While there are a few issues that are directly tied to local issues that Norman does not face, for example, proximity to the Oklahoma County Jail, many are applicable to women in cities across the world. One of the main concerns that came from the photovoice project was safety in public spaces. This included local parks because “exercising at night, or even going for a walk, typically means we have to drive outside of our communities to find places with lights and other people where we are comfortable” (Davis et al., 2020). This is an issue that is also prevalent in Norman, especially if you do not live on or near the University of

Oklahoma campus. This could once again be solved by adding more lighting and designing new parks with safety in mind. The Photovoice project shows concerns and ideas for improvement from African American women. The inherent intersectionality of identities influences the discussions held during the project. Each individual member of the project's views and life have been influenced by the fact that they are both African American and a woman. While these identities may be hard for individuals to separate, sometimes it is important for city planners to look at both aspects separately. There are issues that are presented in the photovoice project that are unique to racial minorities and may not equally impact other groups.

Planning with Racial Minorities

Norman was once a sundown town ("Norman - History and Social Justice," n.d.) and is still a majority-white area. This means that racial minorities are likely to be underserved and underrepresented. The next iteration of the city of Norman's comprehensive plan needs to help all citizens of Norman, without regard to race. As someone who grew up visiting family on the west side of Norman, I was often told not to go on the East side of town because it was the "bad" side. Now that I am older, I know that this is because my family felt that it was not as safe due to the fact that the East side tends to be less wealthy and less white. This idea that the west side of town is better than the east side is harmful but has been interwoven into the history of the city of Norman. I feel that the 2005 plan is trying to colloquially reference unity between the differing demographics and resources on the two sides of Norman by saying that we need to "balance development on the east and west sides of the urbanized area of Norman by continuing to encourage commercial and residential development on the urban east side." However, the next iteration of the city plan needs to discuss what is being done to help all citizens of Norman. New

development needs to be supported on both sides of the city to help debunk the concept that one side of the city is better than the other.

This support from the city of Norman could come from reinvestment in the east side of Norman. It has been found that “people of color are most likely to live in urban areas where decades of disinvestment, the financialization of cities, and poor building standards and regulations create intolerable living conditions” (Beebejaun & Modarres, 2020). This reinvestment could be done in a variety of ways and should be created with community involvement. Some potential ideas include providing funds to help improve housing, sidewalks, and community centers. These would help improve the quality of life for citizens of the east side of Norman. If nothing else, the next comprehensive plan should mention the demographics of Norman and what the city is doing for the underserved.

Overall, the next iteration of the comprehensive city plan of the city of Norman needs to be more specific about what is being done to help specific groups in our community. Improvements to public transportation would help those with disabilities as well as women. To make public transportation more accessible to the disabled, we need to have more practical routes as well as an improved paratransit system that is easier to find information about. It is also important to treat them with respect and create a system that works well for them. To help women, public transportation needs to be safer at night, especially when waiting at a bus stop. This can be improved by increasing lighting and adding emergency call buttons. These solutions can be applied city-wide to make women feel safer at public parks and other amenities. Additionally, the city of Norman needs to do more for citizens of color and acknowledge its racist background. The next version of the comprehensive plan of the city of Norman should have a focus on diversity and what the city is doing to help a range of citizens with unique needs.

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