

Mayor Bartlett Sees Energy Industry as Key to Tulsa's Continued Renaissance

Featured in OIPA's Wellhead March 2013

It took Dewey Bartlett Jr. about three hours in his new job before he wondered what he'd gotten himself into.

It was Dec. 7, 2009, and Bartlett was enjoying the attention that comes with the first day on a new job, especially a job such as his, mayor of Tulsa. Yes, he was still basking in the glow of a successful campaign and he had all kinds of ideas about how to get his beloved hometown back to a place of prominence among America's 50 largest cities.

Then came his 11 a.m. meeting with Mike Kier, City of Tulsa finance director.

"We've got a real problem," Kier told his new boss. "City revenues are just not there. We're going to need to cut \$10 million from the budget or we'll be out of cash in maybe three months."

So much for the honeymoon. The new mayor had to shift gears and get to work.

"Like any businessman – especially maybe somebody who has seen the challenges we've seen in the oil and gas business during the '80s and '90s – I knew immediately we had no choice but to prioritize and to make changes, no matter how difficult," Bartlett recalled recently as he signed documents and worked on his email in between appointments at city hall.

Facing an unexpected crisis, the new mayor sought consulting advice from KPMG, the same firm who helped reinvent the City of Indianapolis. "We took ownership of our problems. While we realized that declining tax revenues were mostly because of the Great Recession, we refused to consider raising taxes. We chose to manage our way out of the crisis."

The hard choices ahead included tense negotiations with unionized city employees, including police and fire departments. "We gave both groups the same choice: cutbacks or layoffs," Bartlett recalled. "The firemen chose to take reduced compensation and benefits in order to preserve their jobs. The police didn't think we would make the cuts, so they refused the pay reduction proposal which led to some very difficult layoffs."

Bartlett said that within a year the city was able to hire back all the police officers that wanted to return to the city, and that the new, streamlined management system implemented, plus the fact the Tulsa economy rebounded more quickly than many parts of the country from the recession, put the city back in the black sooner than anticipated.

Still, the mayor's first term has resulted in a 10% reduction in the total number of city workers (from 4,000 to 3,600). "Tulsa hadn't had a management audit in decades, maybe ever," the mayor said. "KPMG's report contained 1,100 recommendations, twice as many as they offered to Indianapolis, a city that is twice our size! That provides some indication of how inefficient things were."

Some Tulsa leaders were surprised to find the new mayor was a tough-minded, focused businessman. Bartlett definitely was no stranger to tough decisions. During the oil price collapse of 1998, when oil fell as low as \$8/barrel, he had been forced to downsize the family company, Keener Oil. And he was more than a little familiar with difficult political fights, having been a leader of several oil and gas organizations, including chairman of the Oklahoma Independent Petroleum Association (OIPA) and the National Stripper Well Association.

“I think some people in Tulsa maybe thought I was the easy-going son of a famous politician, a third-generation guy who really didn’t have to work, who hadn’t done a lot of heavy lifting, so to speak, in my career,” the mayor said from his small 15th-floor office at City Hall. “But to succeed in today’s oil and gas world, you’ve got to learn every aspect of the business. It’s too competitive – and sometimes very difficult in terms of prices – to survive if you don’t know what you’re doing.”

Bartlett also learned hard lessons in the world of politics and policy. “I learned how to be effective advocating for our industry in the halls of the state capitol and in the Congress. And that wasn’t always easy when your name is Dewey Bartlett and the people in charge of the decision-making are Democrats. I learned to listen, and to work with all types of political people who are trying to do what they believe is best for their communities, their state and their country. I guess it’s where I came to understand the value of a bipartisan, pragmatic approach to government service.”

The son of the former governor and U.S. senator, Dewey had served on the Tulsa City Council in the 1990s and also did a stint on the Oklahoma Turnpike Authority. He lost twice in a bid for mayor (1992) and for state senate (2004) before beating State Sen. Tom Adelson in November, 2009, for the mayor’s job.

Today, more than three years into his tenure as mayor, he sees things headed in a positive direction for Tulsa. “There is a renaissance under way here,” he beams. “You can see it all over the city. People – including all sorts of young, educated people – are moving to Tulsa again.”

Bartlett says the city continues to work toward implementation of many of the streamlining recommendations made by the KPMG study in 2010. Also, the city council underwent a sea change during the 2012 elections, when seven of the nine incumbents either were defeated or chose not to seek reelection.

The mayor is particularly encouraged with the cooperative spirit that now exists within the Tulsa city government. “For many, many years, our city was held back by internal conflicts between the council, the mayor and other city leaders. We couldn’t seem to come together to solve our problems, much less improve things so we could compete for growth.

“The councils criticized the mayors or the mayors couldn’t work with the councils. And representatives from different parts of our city wouldn’t put aside their differences and make decisions in the best interest of the entire city. Finally, the citizens of this city had had enough of the bickering at city hall – and they made their voices heard in last fall’s elections. Now, things are changing – and I am extremely proud and humbled to be a part of what I call Tulsa’s renaissance.”

Tulsa's "strong mayor" form of government gives Bartlett considerably more authority and responsibility than in the more popular "weak mayor" form, where a city manager usually is in charge of administering city government.

"Tulsa prospered for decades with this system," the mayor adds. "It wasn't the system; it was the lack of leadership. We (Bartlett and the new city council) still don't always agree, but that's the way a representative government body is supposed to be," he says. "But, at least now, we disagree without it being personal and divisive. And we work together toward solutions to Tulsa's problems. It's a huge difference from previous years."

The mayor points with pride to many positive trends, including the revitalization of downtown and other long-neglected parts of the city, major improvements to streets and highways, reduction in crime, and a significant increase in employment. Bartlett says it all is connected to the idea of Tulsans reengaging in the future of their city.

"As much as it hurts to admit it, Tulsa had languished for years," Bartlett says. "Our population growth was at the bottom of the list among major cities in the Sun Belt region. I have purposefully made it a top priority of our first term as mayor to spread the word around the county – and around the world – that Tulsa, Oklahoma, is open for business."

The mayor insists that economic development and a particularly intense focus on Tulsa's core employment strengths – energy, aerospace and health care – is directly related to social issues faced by all communities. "Crime is about poverty and neglect and you can best address that with creating more and better jobs in all sectors of our community."

"All of our major challenges – crime, poverty, neglect – must be addressed at the neighborhood level. And during our first term as mayor we've chosen to focus a lot of our time and attention on the role of our churches. The mayor says he and his wife, Victoria, have attended probably 90 different churches during the past three years, spending time getting to understand issues from the grassroots level."

"We've focused a lot of attention on at-risk kids. We've encouraged our policemen and firemen to engage these young people in the neighborhoods, to be involved in church league basketball leagues and anything to bring people together in a positive way."

Bartlett has announced he's seeking reelection. He says if he wins a second term he'll continue to be a champion for economic development for Tulsa. "We've been to Europe, Japan and Taiwan. We've been to New York City, Houston and Dallas. We get up every morning thinking about how to bring more good jobs to Tulsa."

The mayor remains unabashedly pro-energy. "We spent a week in Japan. It is an eye-opener to understand what a dire situation that important country faces as relates to energy. In the aftermath of the tsunami, they are shuttering nuclear plants. Their message to me as a mayor from an energy state in the U.S., 'We need LNG. Help us.'"

So Bartlett took the lead on forging a coalition of mayors who have urged the federal government to expedite permitting of LNG terminals and support the export of domestic natural gas (see accompanying story).

And what other big-city mayor spends 2 ½ days at an energy conference? “We’ve been to Houston for the North American Prospect Expo the past two years. We think it’s a perfect setting to spread the good word about Tulsa.”

For three days in February, the mayor joined representatives of the Tulsa Regional Chamber of Commerce walking the halls to promote people taking a new look at Tulsa for energy jobs. “As alien a thought as it might be to lifelong Tulsans, young people need to be reminded that Tulsa is a world-class energy city. It’s time we quit characterizing it as ‘the former oil capital of the world.’”

Bartlett sees the energy industry, along with aerospace, as key to Tulsa’s revival. “These two industries grew up together in Tulsa. There is now a huge influx of young, well-educated engineers, geologists and entrepreneurs deciding where they will make their careers and start their families. These 20-somethings don’t care one bit about what Tulsa was 50 or 60 years ago. All they want to know is where we are going THIS year.

“I am absolutely convinced Tulsa remains THE best place in America not only to make a living, but to make a life.”