

In The News

T.C. Broadnax Reflects on Nine Months as Dallas City Manager

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Despite all the reorganization and new hires, he doesn't think he's changed much at City Hall. Just wait for 2018, he says.

There was a rumor at City Hall when T.C. Broadnax took over as city manager nine months ago that the housing department was a catch-all for those who couldn't cut it elsewhere in 1500 Marilla. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development is still seeking documentation from the city showing that millions of federal dollars meant to fund affordable housing projects actually made it to those projects. So as Broadnax told a group of about 50 who'd packed into the downtown law firm Munsch Hardt Kopf and Harr on Monday morning to hear him speak, he wasn't surprised to discover a department without a whole lot of experience dealing with housing matters.

"You had a lot of people in there that truly don't understand housing. They have come from other parts and places in the organization, and the rumor had been that if you can't do it anywhere else in the organization, they would send you to housing," he said. "I've seen some semblance of that."

Broadnax spoke for an hour with former Councilwoman Angela Hunt, who posed a mix of reflective and forward-looking questions. The city manager painted a new picture of Dallas' municipal strategy: one where transparency is king, where departments are topped by subject matter experts, and where conversations about transportation and homelessness are driven by the city instead of state and regional partners. And yet, he still had the nerve to not take credit: "I don't think I've made that many changes," he said.

Well, OK. Sure. But some change is evident. By June, Broadnax had swapped out four of the five top assistant city managers who occupied the office under A.C. Gonzalez. He's been proactive at organizing public meetings to connect with the city's residents, to hear their input directly instead of drumming up policies inside I.M. Pei's City Hall without going into the communities he can see through the sloping windows in his office.

He figured out exactly how many assistant city managers and directors report to him—35—and made it clear that they would not last long under him if they did not meet his expectations. He is vowing to increase transparency, because residents tend to be "hypochondriacs on local government." For instance, he's ordered the creation of a website that will allow the public to track each project in the just-approved bond package to keep his people accountable. Heaven help them if they can't prove their worth.

"I've got about 35 people I can tell to go somewhere else if they're not working out. The last time I checked, they're my employees," Broadnax said. "Some people have self-selected to move on and others have wanted to step up and try to be a part of the new team. I think that's been a good dynamic. There are a lot of people who are a little uncomfortable. If you're around me for any length of time, I enjoy people being uncomfortable. Because I'm always uncomfortable. You never want to rest on your laurels; you always want to think someone is chasing you."

That's the attitude he feels he needs to ensure the success of the office, particularly in the two areas that he's deemed priorities: economic development and homelessness. He merged economic development with neighborhood services, arguing that the two can't coexist without each other. He's topped that new department with Raquel Favela, a municipal economic development veteran who has spent time at the National Development Council after a stint under Broadnax in San Antonio. David Noguera, City Hall's new housing head, previously worked alongside HUD. The city's relationship with the federal housing authority "hasn't been good," Broadnax acknowledged, and he sensed a need to bring in new blood to repair it.

"That was a first step for me to help find a way to bring confidence in my new administration but also the administration of our housing programs, to settle and give HUD the comfort that they had people who understood the business," he said. But let's take Broadnax at his word that, despite all this, he hasn't yet changed much. His conclusion shows that he values the actions of his new staff more than the hires themselves.

He provided hints about where the true change will occur. In speaking about the difficulty in bringing affordable housing north of Interstate 30, for instance, he mentioned clever incentives used during his time in San Antonio that benefitted developers who built within the 26-mile urban core. It sounds like a standard tax increment finance district, but the city also stopped incentivizing areas that no longer needed investments. So developers who built inside the city received 10 years of tax abatements; those who didn't received no more than five years of abatements. The plan worked. Broadnax is eagerly awaiting a citywide Market Value Analysis, which he says will help Dallas better identify areas to incentivize, a plan that will inform how to spend the \$55 million voters approved for economic development in the recent bond package. And he has a strong message for developers.

"If you can do things by right and you can make your returns and you don't need anything from the city, fine, have at it," he said. "But the minute that you ask for up-zoning, the minute you ask for some type of change or benefit and/or a TIF or something that allows and requires us to invest dollars in your project, then we have a right and an obligation to ensure that we meet our long-term housing affordability needs. You either take it and work to be a partner and do it or you don't receive any city benefit on our part."

Broadnax spoke of his newest hire for transportation director, a civil engineer named Michael Rogers who came here from Raleigh, N.C. He's already been charged with creating a full-on transportation plan, a study of how everything from freeways to bike trails work together to impact transit, zoning, housing, and economic development policies around our thoroughfares. From there, Rogers will take the lead when dealing with outside agencies and partners—too often, the city manager argued, past administrations let the Texas Department of Transportation and Dallas Area Rapid Transit and the North Central Texas Council of Governments direct the conversation. No longer. That seems to be his message. And he's bringing people from outside the city to pull it off.

So stay tuned, says Broadnax: "2018 will shape up to truly be a year of change."

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