Case Study: A Flag for Norman, Oklahoma, 2016–2020

By Gabriel Bird, DDS

Introduction

This journey started for me in 2016 on listening to a podcast about city flag design. Having grown up in Norman I realized I had no idea if we even had a flag. When I looked it up, I found I was very familiar with it, as it also served as our city seal. I couldn't help but notice that other than city facilities, this flag was very rarely seen around town, it didn't fly on any homes or commercial flag poles, only one bank flew it. It was certainly not culturally visible on t-shirts or stickers etc. It appeared that while often used as the city seal, it had failed to succeed culturally as a flag.

Flags of Norman, Oklahoma

1995–2020   *New Flag Adopted 2020*

I offer this case study to document our process and provide guidance and insights to others who may embark on similar efforts for their cities.

Step 1: Getting started: The Why?

Start by determining why a flag redesign is worthwhile. For me It started in 2016 when I listened to episode 6 of the podcast 99% Invisible [https://99percentinvisible.org/episode/episode-06-99-symbolic/] which outlined the potential power of a well-designed city flag. Wondering during this

episode if we in Norman had a flag, I looked it up and realized I had seen our city flag many times over, I just didn't realize it was our flag. We as Normanites have a remarkable town but we were missing out on the culturally unifying benefits of a well-designed flag.

Our flag did double duty as our city government's seal and is more of a symbol of our local government than a symbol for the citizens of Norman. As such, our flag wasn't put on t-shirts, or hats, or used by local businesses and organizations to identify as Norman (as the flags of Chicago and Tulsa often are, for example). That is due mainly to the fact that the design is a bit too cluttered and busy to lend itself to that sort of use. As another issue, the flag is copyrighted and can't be used for such applications.

Additionally, there is a challenge to our flag perhaps unique to our particular city. Norman is home to my alma mater, the University of Oklahoma. I love our University; if it weren't for OU, Norman would not have the rich culture and world class resources we enjoy. With that however, Norman exists very much in the shadow of the University and a lot of what we are gets a bit lost. If we have a culturally relevant flag, it is the OU logo on a crimson field (a flag I myself fly during the college football season).

So we set out to find a flag design that would be a symbol of the local culture in Norman and free to use so that people could use it to identify as Norman through and through.

Actually Getting Started

This process begins with two simultaneous avenues:

1) Research your current flag. Find out when it was designed and who was involved, find out if where and how it is currently being used. Reach out to them, I call this the "kiss the ring tour" these are the people most likely to feel a need to guard your current flag and oppose your project.
2) Research your municipal government, reach out to your mayor and city council. Determine if there is any sort of procedure in place for flag design/redesign. If not, determine the process of establishing one.

In my case, our soon-to-be-outgoing flag had been designed in 1995 as part of a similar project to establish a flag where we had previously not had one at all. That design was adopted to be both the flag and the seal of our city government. Artist submissions were submitted and a final selection made by committee. There was no protocol in place that addressed either preserving the current flag or outlined a process for replacing it.

In mid-2017 I requested a meeting with our then-mayor, Lynne Miller, to discuss a potential flag redesign project and learn about what the process might look like. She graciously but handily shut me down, expressing that she didn't feel the flag required redesign, that even if privately funded the changes to infrastructure and time burden to city staff were more costly than the project would merit.

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This led me to two conclusions. If this were to work it would need to be:
- Citizen-led
- Independent of the city budget

I will additionally note, even if a city has a budget item for this sort of project, being citizen-led and independent of city budget is still advisable. The most common knee-jerk objections to projects like this are along the lines of "Why are we spending taxpayer money on something like this?", which can be quickly countered by those two aspects.

As I continued to share with city leaders and community partners my ambition to redesign our flag, I found a champion in Ward 4 Council Member Bill Hickman. CM Hickman came up with an avenue to create the redesign committee through the Community Planning and Transportation Committee, which he chaired. I created a 30-minute presentation outlining the "what and why" of the project, presented it to the committee, and in September of 2017 gained a city-sanctioned go ahead to lead a flag redesign project.

Step 2: Research and Create your process

As city flag redesign is a trend sweeping across the nation, there are people out there that have been down this road and can offer indispensable advice. I found those to whom I reached out to be very accessible and helpful. I'd like to offer a special thank-you to Ted Kaye (NAVA secretary, Portland, Oregon), Steve Kodis (Milwaukee, Wisconsin), and Joey Wignarajah (Tulsa, Oklahoma) for their assistance and guidance while I embarked on this project.

Some of the more prominent tips I received were:
- Involve the City Council early and often, and recruit a few council members to be advisory members of the flag redesign committee.
- Frequent updates at publicly attended city council meetings. This will help to mitigate the transparency argument to last-minute naysayers.
- Recruit a volunteer committee to reduce submissions down to a small number of finalists. Assure that the committee is a broad representation of the spectrum of cultures, ages, life experiences, educational background, and lifestyles represented in your town.
- When you get to the final public vote, present a weighted scale. Everyone scores each finalist on a scale from 0 to 10 instead of just picking their favorite. This reduces any individual from campaigning for or against a particular design, and as more votes gather each design converges to its average ranking.

This is also a good time to start estimating budgetary and fundraising needs, as well as project obligations (will you plan to replace existing flags? I'd suggest you do.). This project total cost was around $6,000, with the largest expense being the roughly 40 flags we had made to replace municipal and public school site flags. Anticipate $5,000–10,000 total.

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Step 3: Prepare your materials

Make a PowerPoint presentation (both a 5-min. quick and 30-min. full version), educational materials, website, social media accounts, explainer videos etc.

> *A particular tip I'd like to give here based on a bit of a misstep I took: Make the Facebook presence as a page as opposed to a group. I made a Facebook group, which had a large membership, but as a FB group was unable to make posts or share to other pages or groups, I had to do those things through my personal FB page. This was not a huge problem, but it became a bit challenging to separate my personal identity from the project. Making the FB presence as a page would give the project a voice of its own.

Create FAQ & Answers (see Appendix A). You will have a lot of repeated standard questions and criticisms. Craft responses to these as you will reference them often. I kept my crafted responses on a google doc with, when possible, time-stamp references to the full flag presentation and a link to a Youtube video of the full flag presentation (see Appendix B). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MaRxoYLvc8M

Paid resources:
- Website domain registered, hosting expense $500/year www.normanflag.com
- Initial flag supply for city facilities and public school sites, roughly $5,000
- Small goodies, lapel pins, desk flags, etc, $300

Free resources:
- Email—simple gmail account newnormanflag@gmail.com
- Google suites, docs, sheets, and forms
- Web design—graciously donated by Day Creative
- Press Coverage—regular press releases sent to local news channels and newspaper

Step 4: Raise awareness and support

Network: So much of the groundwork is dependent on face-to-face interactions, the more people you can discuss the project with and gain support from the better—newspaper editors, community leaders, and city council members in particular. I pursued transcript support, local business and civic organizations, and social media campaigning. I made the presentation to any organization or group that would have me, Rotary Clubs, Arts Council, Downtowners and Eastside business association etc. Along the way as I engaged interested people—I was able to recruit my co-chair, Grady Carter, as well as the selection committee members.

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Step 5: Execute

Timeline

> 9/27/2018   CPTC grants Gabriel Bird permission to form Ad Hoc Flag redesign committee and begin redesign project.

> 3/03/2020   Final selection committee established; members announced to city council.

> 1/16/20–3/19/20   Open submissions for designs and artist statements. We received 117 designs from 57 different designers.

> 4/01/2020–4/30/2020   Open public rating phase. We received 2,389 responses.

> 6/09/2020   City Council reveal and vote.

> 6/14/2020   Formal Flag adoption date (Flag Day).

Mechanics of the process

Collecting and organizing design submissions:

After researching different techniques to support form submission (Submittables, etc.), none quite fit our budget. We took most submissions and artist statements via email. The website submission tab was a simple email template. We also created a paper form and provided it at our local public library locations.

As designs came in, I removed any personal identifying information, name, email, DOB, etc., so that they were anonymous to the selection committee. Each design was given a number and I tracked the creator info and email on a spreadsheet. The numbered anonymous designs and artist statements were compiled on a google doc which was provided to the selection committee members for their review. This master collection was not released to the public until after the project was completed in its entirety.

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1goJ_PYVc4VL7hyVx1apDbckgOjxLtCsq9SYIkP0YjFo/edit?usp=sharing

Public rating:

After considering several web-based survey services, we ended up using Google Forms for the final public vote. It is free, it allows unlimited responses, and data can be exported to a google sheet with ease. The only drawback is individuals need a google account to submit responses to the form, but at this point that's most of us. I did receive a few ratings via email and made my work address available for paper scores and input these scores (five in total) manually. The

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rating form was emailed to all design applicants, linked on our website, and shared on social media by us, the city government, and the local newspaper.

Step 6: Reveal the design

We gave ourselves 5 weeks from the end of public rating to the official reveal and city council vote. This gave us time to:

- Confirm results.
- Fabricate new flags to be provided to city offices, police department, fire department, and Norman Public schools and make available for retail.
- Source lapel pins, desk flags, additional flag related items to be distributed to council members and those involved in the project.
- Award winning design prize.
- Create design reveal video (featuring local celebrity and football coaching legend Barry Switzer!).

The final design was revealed and adopted at the 06/09/2020 council meeting* (https://youtu.be/GdfoJG7e0AM?t=820; skip to 13:40).

> *Historic note, this was the first CC meeting following the murder of George Floyd and my presentation is interrupted part way through (29:20) by local peaceful protestors. They graciously allowed me to complete my presentation and seemed to receive it well.

Step 7: Write a case study

In fact, take notes throughout the process so that you can document your key learnings to guide others who follow you.

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Appendix A: Frequently Asked Questions and their Answers

Q: Who is paying for all of this?

A: Fundraising and crowdfunding. This project will receive no financial assistance from the City of Norman.

Q: What will happen to the current city flag?

A: It will remain as the logo for the City of Norman Government and municipal agencies. Street signs, city vehicles etc. will go unchanged.

Q: Why are we doing this when the city has so many other things to work on?

A: As this is citizen-led, it is designed to present no additional burden to city staff and officials. While we are working closely with city staff and officials, it will not distract from their current obligations.

Q: Who is going to design the flag?

A: One of you! We will be crowdsourcing the design. In the coming months we will roll out time frames and guidelines for submitting your ideas for a new city flag.

Q: Do you have to live in Norman to submit a design?

A: Nope, anyone can send in a design.

Q: Can I send multiple designs?

A: Absolutely! Just please send each separately with their own artist statement.

Q: Do you have a preferred image file type?

A: Yes, .png is ideal but we can take most major file types; vector files will be best.

Q: Why a new flag?

A: We have linked some information below discussing the benefits of a well-designed city flag.

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Appendix B: Structured Responses to Criticism

the answers to most of your questions are contained in the presentation I gave to the BACA back in October, https://youtu.be/MaRxoYLvc8M Additionally we have some great resources linked on our site that will fill in the blanks on the rest of your questions. https://normanflag.com/links/

this project is citizen led and privately funded. It won't be costing the city anything and will not be utilizing city staff. I'd like to invite you to watch the full presentation, it should answer any questions you have about the process https://youtu.be/MaRxoYLvc8M

We also discussed the process and how it will spare the city any cost on the It's the Norm podcast. https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/let-your-flag-fly-norman/id1493598110?i=1000464616036

The current flag design will remain the City Government logo and will remain as is on all street signs, city vehicles etc. It is all covered in the presentation, skip to 21:26 for the cost and use discussion. https://youtu.be/MaRxoYLvc8M

I'd love for you to watch the full presentation. It should answer any questions you have. https://youtu.be/MaRxoYLvc8M we also generated a shorter version https://www.facebook.com/gbdental/videos/10108418440604437/

lots of cities have flags. It is a very common practice. Norman has had a flag since 1995 but it's not been a successful design. I'm sorry to hear of your skepticism, but this project aims to simply produce a well designed flag that the people of norman can use & appreciate. Learn more at www.normanflag.com

the city certainly has some budgetary concerns these days which is why this project is designed to not utilize city budget or staff hours. Replacing street signs is not part of our scope or goal. With the goal of adopting a flag as a cultural symbol of the people of our town I don't think it would be appropriate to back it into the use that the City Government logo will maintain and assume, it should be left alone. Any notion that there will be future replacement of these city administered infrastructure items is purely speculative and not an action I would endorse. Furthermore, I'd prefer our flag exist as a symbol for the people of our town, not to indicate the work of our city government, the two should be separate.

Many places that have flags operate with a separate, independent logo or seal to represent the purview of that local government. Having an independent flag and city government logo will not lead to confusion. Cities like Tulsa and Chicago, among many others, have very successful flags and in those cases the city governments operate and utilize a separate government logo. On a more grand scale, there are no federal government agencies that solely utilize the Flag of The United States of America as their logo, for many of the same reasons, the flag is a symbol of our culture and people, not government agency.

Another common quick response is "Why are we doing this instead of addressing [fill in the blank of a city issue you are concerned about… storm water, senior center, homelesness, mosquitos etc.]" Well this is exactly why I proposed this to be a citizen led project as opposed to trying to get our city officials and staff to handle it. I want them focused on those city issues and outside of occasional updates on the project will not burden them. This project will in no way interfere with the work being done on those important issues. If you feel strongly about any of those issues I'd encourage you to get involved in a city committee or local nonprofit that addresses and works with those issues, and if one doesn't exist form a group, fund raise for your cause and bring the solution pre-addressed to the city council. That is what I did when I saw

a need for a new flag. You may feel a flag re-design is a silly use of resources and you are entitled to that opinion, but this project isn't detracting resources from the cause that you are passionate about and I would encourage you to find ways to drive resources to those causes.

Hello all, sorry I'm late to this lively discussion, I will try to respond to as many comments as possible but the kids will be waking up soon and I'll need to start cranking out breakfast. First this project is citizen led and privately funded. It won't be costing the city anything and will not be utilizing city staff. I'd love for you to watch the full presentation. It should answer any questions you have. https://youtu.be/MaRxoYLvc8M we also generated a shorter version https://www.facebook.com/gbdental/videos/10108418440604437/ Additionally we have some great resources linked on our site that will fill in the blanks on the rest of your quesions. https://normanflag.com we have a FAQ section and links to several articles, videos and podcasts that explain the value that a well designed flag can bring to a city. We also discussed the process and how it will spare the city any cost on the It's the Norm podcast. https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/let-your-flag-fly-norman/id1493598110?i=1000464616036 With that I'll say a few things: Many places that have flags operate with a separate, independent logo or seal to represent the purview of that local government. Having an independent flag and city government logo will not lead to confusion. Cities like Tulsa and Chicago, among many others, have very successful flags and in those cases the city governments operate and utilize a separate government logo. On a more grand scale, there are no federal government agencies that solely utilize the Flag of The United States of America as their logo, for many of the same reasons, the flag is a symbol of our culture and people, not government agency. The city certainly has some budgetary concerns these days which is why this project is designed to not utilize city budget or staff hours. Replacing street signs is not part of our scope or goal. With the goal of adopting a flag as a cultural symbol of the people of our town I don't think it would be appropriate to back it into the use that the City Government logo will maintain and assume, it should be left alone. Any notion that there will be future replacement of these city administered infrastructure items is purely speculative and not an action I would endorse. Furthermore I'd prefer our flag exist as a symbol for the people of our town, not to indicate the work of our city government, the two should be separate. Another common quick response is "Why are we doing this instead of addressing [fill in the blank of a city issue you are concerned about… storm water, senior center, homelesness, mosquitos etc.]" Well this is exactly why I proposed this to be a citizen led project as opposed to trying to get our city officials and staff to handle it. I want them focused on those city issues and outside of occasional updates on the project, will not burden them. This project will in no way interfere with the work being done on those important issues. If you feel strongly about any of those issues I'd encourage you to get involved in a city committee or local nonprofit that addresses and works with those issues, and if one doesn't exist form a group, fund raise for your cause and bring the solution pre-addressed to the city council. That is what I did when I saw a need for a new flag. You may feel a flag re-design is a silly use of resources and you are entitled to that opinion, but this project isn't detracting resources from the cause that you are passionate about and I would encourage you to find ways to drive resources to those causes.
Another hitch with our current flag is that since it lives a double life as our flag and city logo, it is copyrighted, so even if you wanted to use it to show your home town pride on a t-shirt, poster, or cell phone case etc. you can't. The new design will be free use.

At any rate aside from a few cranky people calling me ugly names on social media, this has been an exciting project to take on and as designs and artist statements start to come in it's refreshing to see how people love and view our town. It has gotten me to conversations with people I would have otherwise not met on topics we would otherwise not have discussed. From teachers, citizens, student and professional groups, a lot of people share my love of our town and that just plain feels good. You don't have to endorse what we're doing here but please be respectful and give us the room to do it, I assure you, it is

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no threat to you and the things you hold dear. Anyone still reading, we are taking design submission through March 19th at www.normanflag.com I'd love to see what you've got.

Yes, the current flag design will remain the City Government logo and will remain as is on all street signs, city vehicles etc. We will have a separate flag and city government logo after this project. This project is citizen led and privately funded. It won't be costing the city anything and will not be utilizing city staff. I'd like to invite you to watch the full presentation, it should answer any questions you have about the process https://youtu.be/MaRxoYLvc8M we also generated a shorter version https://www.facebook.com/gbdental/videos/10108418440604437/
Additionally we have some great resources linked on our site that will fill in the blanks on any remaining quesions. https://normanflag.com

There has also been some concerns expressed that this project may lead to a full on city rebranding effort. That certainly is not in the scope of this project. It is also not within the scope of this project to prevent a future city council from undertaking a rebranding project. But if; however speculative, this project sparks the Council to under take a budgetarily reckless rebranding project I will stand side by side with you at that city council meeting to oppose it.

I apologize if it came off as harsh but there are two main observations/factors behind that statement. The first being that we've had the current flag since 1995 and you simply don't see it flown around town. Few people even know that that is our flag. Then doing a bit of research I found that part of why it hasn't succeeded as a flag is that it's pretty well outside of the studied principles shared by historically successful flags. It is too busy, banner style, has lettering, it is a bit of a messy jumbled design for a flag. There are some articles and videos about these principles of flag design linked on the website normanflag.com. When I started researching our flag it became apparent that another factor working against our flag is that it does double duty as our city government's logo (and it's copyrighted), which really restricts potential use as a culturally significant flag. The example I like to give here is suppose a local microbrewery wants to signify they are Norman based by putting our flag on the label (which has happened with the Tulsa flag). If it is an independent flag it's perfectly fine, but if that flag doubles as the city government logo it is iffy because it wouldn't be appropriate for the city to be endorsing an alcoholic beverage. I hope that clarifies things a bit, I don't hate our current flag, I just don't see that it has succeeded as a flag and feel that a new independent flag design, separate from the government's logo is a step in a positive direction.

There are a few factors that challenge our flag and some compelling evidence that it has not succeeded as a flag. The first being that we've had the current flag since 1995 and you simply don't see it flown around town. Few people even know that it is our flag. doing a bit of research it becomes apparent that part of why it hasn't succeeded as a flag is that it's pretty well outside of the studied principles shared by historically successful flags. It is too busy, banner style, has lettering, it is a bit of a messy jumbled design for a flag. There are some articles and videos about these principles of flag design linked on the website normanflag.com. When I started researching our flag it became apparent that another factor working against our flag is that it does double duty as our city government's logo (and it's copyrighted), which really restricts potential use as a culturally significant flag. The example I like to give here is suppose a local microbrewery wants to signify they are Norman based by putting our flag on the label (which has happened with the Tulsa flag). If it is an independent flag it's perfectly fine, but if that flag doubles as the city government logo it is iffy because it wouldn't be appropriate for the city to be endorsing an alcoholic beverage. I hope that clarifies things a bit, I don't hate our current flag, I just don't see that it has succeeded as a flag and feel that a new independent flag design, separate from the government's logo is a step in a positive direction.

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All of that said, the current flag will be alive and well as the city government logo and there is nothing to stop someone from continuing to fly it or pursuing permission from the city to use it in some other way to signify their pride in Norman.

 I've been accused of hating our city flag but that couldn't be farther from the truth. Had I seen it commonly flown or even seen more people aware that we have a flag in the first place, I certainly would not have embarked on this path. Whether that happens with the new design, only time will tell. But I think the most important work of this project will be to separate our flag from the double duty as our city seal. Heck, I like The finalists but several of my personal favorites didn't make the cut. Somewhere down the line people may decide they want to redesign all over again if this one doesn't gain traction and I'm OK with that. At the very least we be at a point where we have a separate flag and seal. Ultimately for me that is the most important and valuable outcome of this project.

I'm a bit late to this conversation so don't know if there is much for me to lend that hasn't already been said. I get that not everyone is thrilled with the finalists, I have several personal favorites that didn't make it close to the finals, but that is a part of the process that has succeeded time and time over in city flag redesign projects. I hope we can agree that this will represent an improvement over the current design, and even if we don't agree on that there is nothing to stop someone from flying that flag, or pursuing permission to use it's image to promote a Norman based group or organization. At the very least I hope we can agree on the value of separating the flag as an independent symbol from the city government's logo. I think one of the greatest factors working against our flag is that it does double duty as our city government's logo (and it's copyrighted), which really restricts potential use as a culturally significant flag. The example I like to give here is suppose a local microbrewery wants to signify they are Norman based by putting our flag on the label (which has happened with the Tulsa flag). If it is an independent flag it's perfectly fine, but if that flag doubles as the city government logo it is iffy because it wouldn't be appropriate for the city to be endorsing an alcoholic beverage. I hope that clarifies things a bit, I don't hate our current flag, I just don't see that it has succeeded as a flag and feel that a new independent flag design, separate from the government's logo is a step in a positive direction.

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Appendix C: Special notes and thanks to…

- The creator of the winning design, who asked to remain anonymous.

- Day Creative and Matthew Allen for donating web design.

- Norman Board of Realtors for sponsoring the winning flag $500 prize.

- Sarah Boone and Clark Melton.

- The 1995 Flag Committee. I've been accused of disliking the old flag design, which couldn't be farther from the truth. I have drawn great inspiration from your work in that project and strive to continue your legacy of citizen driven community involvement. By freeing it from its double duty as flag and seal I hope to see it signify the important work of local government for years to come.

- James White, The Gym Collective, for organizing the Flag Day 5k.

- The Visit Norman mask project.

- Sublime Signs for sourcing the replacement flags for city facilities and retailing them to the public.

- Ted Kaye, Steve Kodis, and Joey Wignarajah, for fielding multiple phone calls, emails, and providing indispensable advice throughout this process.

- The critics. I always feel there is value to criticism and this project has received a bit, I feel that project like this, among many things don't hold up to criticism if they don't have truth to them.

- Everyone who submitted a design and everyone that scored in the final round.

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