

Oklahoma City clears \$25M Buc-ee's deal as CEO targets red states

BY SAM ROYKA

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Oklahoma City approved a \$25 million Interstate 40 infrastructure agreement Tuesday to bring in its first Buc-ee's, weeks after the chain's CEO said he plans to build only in conservative states.

The measure passed 5-2, with two abstentions. Mayor David Holt and Council Members Bradley Carter, Todd Stone, Matt Hinkle and Mark Stonecipher supported the measure. Council Members JoBeth Hamon and James Cooper voted against it, while Council Members Katrina Avers and Camal Pennington abstained.

The agreement with the Buc-ee's CEO-owned company CSMS Management LLC and the Oklahoma Department of Transportation will widen North Cimarron Road, redesign the interchange bridge and build new access ramps along I-40 in Ward 3 of the city.

Buc-ee's CEO targets red states

Buc-ee's co-founder and CEO Arch "Beaver" Aplin III said at an August groundbreaking in Benton, Arkansas, that the chain intends to favor "conservative, business-friendly" states for future stores.

"Life's too short to try to build in places that people don't appreciate what you're bringing versus a place like this, where people do appreciate what you're building," Aplin said in a video shared on social media by Arkansas Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders.

The travel center retailer operates locations in Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia.

"That concept, that idea of a conservative, businessfriendly, family-oriented concept, works so much better if it trickles down from the very leadership from the very top at the governor's office," Aplin said.

Funding the interchange

Critics questioned using millions in state and federal funds to upgrade an interchange that would primarily benefit a private corporation. Holt emphasized the return on investment, saying drivers for hundreds of miles would reroute their stops for a new Buc-ee's.

"There's no question this is going to be a sales tax benefit," Holt said.

Total funding for the highway ramp and bridge project includes \$7.58 million from Oklahoma City, \$6.05 million from CSMS Management, a subsidiary owned by the Bucee's CEO, and \$11.38 million from the state Transportation Department.

The city's portion is covered by a \$10 million federal grant secured by former U.S. Sen. Markwayne Mullin, now Homeland Security secretary. The remaining \$2.5 million will help cover the resulting infrastructure upgrades such as sewer lines that Buc-ees will also partially cover.



Buc-ee's mascot greets visitors at the Ennis, Texas, location with a toothy smile and a truckload of Buc-ee souvenirs. PHOTO BY BRYDGET SNOOK

During public comment, Oklahoma City resident Michael Washington said he disagreed with using public resources to assist a private corporation.

"If Buc-ee's wants to come in and the State of Oklahoma lets them, let them put more money into it than us," Washington said.

The road work is only the first part of building a new Buc-ee's. Questions remain about how Buc-ee's will fund its construction and whether the city will be involved.

Cooper said he has heard that economic incentive packages could surface later, though no proposals are finalized.

"I have conflicting news about whether or not eventually the owners will come to the city for an economic development incentive," Cooper said. "I have learned privately that they are, but then I read last night in the news that they are not."

City Manager Craig Freeman said earlier this week there will not be any city-funded incentives for Buc-ee's, but that other infrastructure will tie into the project.

At the meeting Tuesday, Holt said no city incentive packages are tied to the project.

Growth on the outskirts

The project site sits on the far western edge of Oklahoma City near Yukon.

Cooper said he would rather allocate public infrastructure funds to neighborhoods that need help with their roads than build a new travel center. He said money should go to redeveloping places like Shepherd Mall instead of building a Buc-ee's.

"If we go down this path of improving the infrastructure at I-40 and Cimarron, we are going to not just induce a Buc-ee's going there; we're going to induce further development out there," Cooper said. "It will take up farm and country land, and with that will come the need for further infrastructure."

He urged city leadership to focus on neglected corridors, including Interstate 240, Shepherd Mall, Penn Crossing and Shields Boulevard. Cooper asked the city manager for a corridor study to find opportunities for high-density, mixed-use developments.

During public comment, Oklahoma City resident Joy Reardon urged the council to protect the businesses that already exist in that area, saying a wider highway would bring new housing developments that push businesses out of an area that is rural, agricultural and industrial.

“We need to start thinking about our inner core, not keep building further and further out,” Reardon said. “Oklahoma City has grown way too big.”

She said the city’s 621 square miles is too large.

Cooper said urban infill can offer better long-term financial returns than travel centers, particularly through job training and investing in small businesses.

“I don’t think that we should be using taxpayer dollars to incentivize bringing a wealthy, profitable company like this here when we could be incentivizing mixed-use development,” Cooper said.

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