A History of Tulsa Annexation
Acknowledgements

Most of the information in this report is drawn from TULSA TRIBUNE and TULSA WORLD news archives, compiled by the research staff of the Tulsa City-County Library.

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* Land area data from the 1940s to the present were provided by City of Tulsa Public Works Department, Planning Division; information from 1900 to 1940 is from “Tulsa Area Now 50 Times as Large as 60 Years Ago,” TULSA TRIBUNE, Oct. 13, 1961.
A History of Tulsa Annexation

Tulsa began as a Creek tribal town (one of three “Tallassee” towns in the Muscogee Nation west of the Mississippi). Its modern identity, however, is traced to 1879 and the establishment of a post office on the pony mail route through Indian Territory.¹

In less than a century, fueled by an immense natural wealth of oil, Tulsa would grow from a small tribal town, to a railroad camp of tents and crude buildings, to the “Oil Capital of the World,” and a sprawling modern American city.

In 1882, Tulsa had a population of about 200. By the time the town was incorporated, on January 18, 1898, its population had grown to 1,100.² But, Tulsa’s early development was just a prelude to the explosive growth that followed the discovery of oil at Red Fork in 1901.

Tulsa’s population grew to nearly 20,000 by 1910, to more than 70,000 by 1920, and would double yet again by 1930. In 1930, just three decades after it was incorporated, Tulsa was home to more than 140,000 people.³


² Dunn at 8, 18-21.

³ Id. at 57; Debo et al at 206; U.S. Census Bureau (www.census.gov).
For nearly 70 years, Tulsa was a densely populated city. As late as 1960, while just the 49th largest city by population, Tulsa was the 19th most densely populated large city in the country. The city held over 260,000 people in a land area of just 50 square miles (about a quarter of Tulsa’s current land area).4

The fundamental composition of our city would change, however, in the spring of 1966. Confronted with ambitious and fast-growing suburbs, city leaders would make a fateful decision to triple Tulsa’s land area in a single sweeping annexation. That decision would set Tulsa’s course for the next half-century, to the present day.

The history of Tulsa’s land expansion – from just a few acres to nearly 200 square miles – is one of variously conservative and aggressive policies, occasionally dramatic confrontations with surrounding communities, and near-constant reassessment of the costs and benefits of city services.

1900 – 1940

“Even though today we consider a point at a distance of ten miles or more from downtown as being in the city, early Tulsans did not consider even a short distance of a mile or less to be within the city limits. In the very early years even a short two or three blocks was considered by them as being in the ‘country.’”5

That perception began to change soon after the discovery of oil at Red Fork, in 1901. The city, which began as a town of just 1½ square miles in 1900, more than doubled in size, to 3½ square miles, by 1910.6

Tulsa grew so fast, in fact, that by 1916 local leaders had begun to wonder just how big a city should be.

The small city of 200,000 people may be and usually is just as capable in all that a city affords its inhabitants as in the city of 2,000,000. Cities of


5 Dunn at 57.

200,000 usually have as good a water supply and as good sewage as do cities of 2,000,000, their people get from job to work as quickly, their streets are as clean and well paved, their housing and sanitation are as good. Where then is the advantage in great size? Is it educational advantages, opportunities for amusement or social life or activity? Everyone knows that in none of these things does the small city deny its inhabitants any material advantage had by the inhabitants of a large city. Why should cities vie with one another to attain size? Size merely makes a city no more fit to serve its inhabitants.  

That conservative outlook, however, soon gave way to optimistic expectations of growth. When asked in 1925 by the TULSA WORLD about his predictions for Tulsa’s growth, city father J.M. Hall replied,

My, my, my, there isn’t any telling how big Tulsa will be 25 years from now if it keeps growing like it has, increasing 10,000 population a year. With the Chamber of Commerce program of advertising this city and with big industries beginning to come in, the growth is unlimited. I think half a million population for 1950 is a conservative estimate.  

One of Tulsa’s most prominent early annexations occurred in the fall of 1927, when Red Fork officially became a part of Tulsa.

Tulsa’s history is laced with stories of the strong competition between Tulsa and various other hamlets in the area, especially with regard to Red Fork. The rivalry between Tulsa and Red Fork grew especially steamy for a time but was short-lived, for Tulsa’s promoters were not to be outdone.

On October 16, 1927, nearly a thousand people gathered for the annexation ceremonies. Ironically, the annexation occurred at Red Fork’s request. “Some of

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7 Reprinted in “Tulsa Spirit” (a Chamber of Commerce publication) (Continental Heritage Press, 1979).

8 Dunn at 82.

9 Id. at 32.
the old-timers who had passed on would have been shocked to see the day this could happen.”

“There is no Mason-Dixon line between Tulsa and Red Fork now,” said Judge Dudley C. Monk, Trust Officer of the First Trust and Savings Bank. “Tulsa has been called the Magic City. Tulsa is also a Magnetic City,” he declared.

City of Tulsa
Land Area, 1900-1940

Just as a tree’s rings reveal years of slow or rapid growth, Tulsa’s early annexations are a reflection of its economic fortunes. Tulsa grew rapidly during the oil-boom decade of the 1920s, more than doubling in size from 7 to 20 square miles. But by 1930, the Great Depression had drastically slowed Tulsa’s expansion. Tulsa’s land area grew by just one half square mile in the decade of the 1930s.

10 Dunn at 32.

11 Id.

12 See, e.g., “Tulsa Area Now 50 Times as Large as 60 Years Ago, TULSA TRIBUNE, Oct. 13, 1961 (map illustrating city’s rapid growth in the 1920s and slow growth in the 1930s).
1940-1950

Tulsa expanded its land base slowly, but steadily, after World War II, to accommodate the trend toward suburbanization. Annexations during this period consisted of relatively frequent but small expansions. New housing additions were regularly incorporated into city limits as they were developed and as developers coordinated with the city for the provision of municipal services. 13

For example, in 1948, the city annexed 43 housing additions and other small tracts, mostly to the south and northeast. The annexations added about 639 acres to the city, with the largest tract being the 40-acre Adams Estates to the south. Despite the large number of annexations in 1948, the city’s land area increased by just one square mile. 14

Though still relatively modest in scope, “the largest annexation program in Tulsa’s history [to that point] was completed during 1949.” 15 That year, the City Commission approved 60 annexation ordinances, embracing 59 housing additions and small tracts of land, as well as the entire town of Dawson. The city added about 6½ square miles of land and approximately 7,500 new residents.

Annexation actions during this period were routinely recommended to the City Commission by a “Mayor’s Annexation Committee,” whose work was often prompted and supported by the Chamber of Commerce. 16

13 See, e.g., “Tulsa Expands Several Blocks by Annexation,” TULSA TRIBUNE, July 25, 1947 (“Braden said the city has a contract with the original developers of the addition to purchase the water line upon annexation.”); see also Tulsa Revised Ordinances, Title 6, Ch. 2, §§ 13, 14 (1945) (describing minimum development requirements for annexation).


15 “City Annexes Record Area in Past Year,” TULSA WORLD, Jan. 6, 1950.

16 Id. (“All [1848 annexations] were recommended by the mayor’s annexation committee headed by attorney Russell Hunt.”); c.f. “Dawson’s Plea for Annexation is Held Valid, TULSA TRIBUNE, Jan. 24, 1949 (describing the Tulsa Chamber of Commerce Civics Department, which was “concerned with annexation”)
Among the annexation highlights during this period:

- In 1948, a west-side newspaper advocated “disannexation” of areas west of the Arkansas River, including Red Fork and Carbondale. The paper asserted several grievances, including congested traffic, the city’s failure to build a limited-access highway, the poor condition of sewer drainage, and poorly maintained alleys and sidewalks.\(^{17}\)

- In 1948, a Chamber of Commerce committee recommended that the city abandon a plan to annex the then-new Osage Hills development, because annexation into Osage County would have required the excise boards of both Osage and Tulsa Counties to approve city budgets, and because the two counties maintained different millage rates for municipal governments.\(^{18}\)

- On July 7, 1949, in the largest single annexation to that point in Tulsa’s history, the town of Dawson “officially became a part of the Oil Capital.”\(^{19}\) In this single action, Tulsa added approximately 2½ square miles of land area, and about 3,500 residents.\(^{20}\) The TRIBUNE proclaimed “A progressive, wide‐awake community that had a lot on the ball as an individual town . . . became a part of Tulsa a few days ago.”\(^{21}\)

### 1950 through 1965

Tulsa’s land area more than doubled in the 1950s. City Commissioners annexed 25.89 square miles in that decade, increasing the size of the city from 24.04 square miles to 49.93 square miles. The city grew in a nearly contiguous ring, with the greatest expansion occurring south and east.\(^ {22}\)


\(^{19}\) “Dawson Part of Tulsa as Court OK’s Merger,” TULSA WORLD, July 8, 1949.

\(^{20}\) Id.


Though there were no annexations at all in 1958, the City Commission annexed almost twice as many tracts in 1959 as any other year in the decade. The 1959 annexation drive was purportedly aimed at increasing the city’s population in anticipation of the 1960 census.\(^\text{23}\)

“From a sprawling village of just a little more than one square mile at the turn of the century, Tulsa [had] increased its size by 50 times in area and jumped in population from 1,390 to 261,685,” by 1961.\(^\text{24}\)

There was just one “de-annexation” in the 1950s, when Tulsa ceded jurisdiction over the Tulsa County Fairgrounds. “Owned by the county, the fairgrounds usually [was] not considered for annexation to the city, but special problems … caused it to come and go from the city limits.”\(^\text{25}\)

The Tulsa Metropolitan Area Planning Commission (TMAPC) was established in 1953, replacing the city and county planning commissions. At that time, the TMAPC’s jurisdiction extended five miles beyond city limits. Therefore, as city limits continued to expand during this period, so did the TMAPC’s planning boundaries.\(^\text{26}\)

As with more modern annexation discussions, debate during this period often focused on the balance between serving existing areas of the city and extending municipal services to outlying areas.

The city’s persistent expansion through the early 1960s prompted the TRIBUNE to declare that “Tulsa has been outgrowing its city government steadily in recent years.” The TRIBUNE went on to observe that “the anguished cries from City Hall for more money each year usually don’t originate from the elected officials and

\(^{23}\) Id.

\(^{24}\) “Tulsa Area Now 50 Times as Large as 60 Years Ago,” TULSA TRIBUNE, Oct. 13, 1961.


politicians. They are the echoes of pleas for help by employees of city departments.”

In 1961, some members of Tulsa’s Chamber of Commerce, “agog at Oklahoma City’s rapid expansion,” questioned whether Tulsa’s annexation policies were too conservative. In response, Street Commissioner Guy Hall “said that if annexation is to proceed at a faster clip the city must have new sources of revenue.” (At the time, “city government [was] not tax supported and [had to] operate from revenues it [received] from its services.”).

City officials described a litany of city services that would be inadequate if Tulsa were to expand rapidly – from water, to storm water drainage and flood control, to traffic signals, and police and fire protection. For example, “Police Chief Joe McGuire said the city [had] only 1.3 police officers for every 1,000 residents and that he didn’t feel like his department could support any more annexation until it [received] more men and equipment.” Fire Chief G.L. Sartain echoed the Police Chief’s concerns.

The city would maintain its steady but relatively modest annexation program for another four years, until 1966, when the city would triple in size overnight.

Among the annexation highlights during the period from 1950 through 1965:

- In 1955 and ’56, after Tulsans voted to annex the “incorporated square-mile suburb of Highland Park” (31st to 41st, Yale to Sheridan), Highland Park trustees filed a lawsuit claiming petition irregularities. A judge issued a temporary restraining order, but the “Battle of Highland Park” ended when a visiting district judge from Alva – assigned to the case when local judges were disqualified – ruled against the town and upheld Tulsa’s annexation action.


29 Id.

• In 1961, Tulsa leaders protested proposed changes in state annexation laws that would have required cities to demonstrate that they can provide specific municipal services before they could annex property. City officials argued that Tulsa’s annexation policies were conservative, particularly compared to Oklahoma City’s massive “land grabs.” (At the time, Tulsa occupied 49.5 square miles, while Oklahoma City had incorporated over 400 square miles.) Lawmakers agreed to address Tulsa’s concerns.31

• In 1961, “the people living in the area bounded by Lewis and Harvard Avenues and 51st and 61st streets indicated to city officials that they did not want to be annexed. Street Commissioner Guy Hall responded that he “couldn’t be happier,” because drainage problems caused by Joe Creek and its tributaries would cost the city millions to correct.32

• In 1962, a Chamber of Commerce subcommittee studying the creation of a port authority was asked to consider annexation to expand Tulsa’s city limits to the Port of Catoosa on the Verdigris River.33

• In 1962, the city annexed its water line to a point approximately 15 miles east of its corporate limits. The action was apparently intended, in part, to frustrate a plan by land speculators to incorporate a 4,500-acre tract near the anticipated Port of Catoosa.34 The city’s action was obstructed when the Rogers County Attorney “refused to approve the sale of port bonds until Tulsa de-annexed the land in question.”35

• In 1964, the annexation of an area south of the Skelly Bypass generated protests by some residents, many of whom maintained businesses or kept livestock and wanted “to continue living the way [they had], without city regulations.” One resident operated a fireworks business and stored explosives at his property at 53rd and Lewis. City officials indicated that they would consider a waiver so


that the fireworks could remain in the city until arrangements could be made to move them.36

1966

“If this is an annexation war, Mayor Maxwell declared, then it will be clear that Tulsa did not fire the first shot.”37

Through 1965, Tulsa maintained a steady and fairly conservative annexation policy. Tulsa officials resisted pressure to mimic Oklahoma City’s abnormally rapid expansion, focusing instead on slow and steady growth and the provision of adequate city services.

![Image of City of Tulsa Land Area, 1900-1965]

The city abruptly abandoned its conservative policy on Friday March 18th, 1966.


On Monday of that week, the town of Sand Springs had unexpectedly annexed a fence line around 110 square miles, from 81st West Avenue to the Keystone Dam. That action was kept secret for three days.38

When they became aware of Sand Springs’ sweeping move, Tulsa officials were quick to condemn it. Admittedly caught by surprise, they denounced the Sand Springs annexation as “politically immature, unnecessary, unprovoked and unwarranted.”39

Mayor James Maxwell stated publicly that, by its action, Sand Springs officials had “turned their back on the cooperation in planning” that metro area municipalities had long enjoyed. He further claimed that the town had “ruptured the ‘green belt’ concept which ha[d] been a long-standing gentlemen’s agreement between Tulsa and the surrounding county towns.”40

Sand Springs Mayor John Hess responded that his Council’s action had been prompted by a recent “breakdown of the Tulsa Metropolitan Area Planning Commission,” though he had been quoted earlier saying that the plan had been in place for several months.41

After leveling its “stinging attack,” Tulsa City Commissioners announced plans to establish a “barrier around Tulsa’s ‘logical, reasonable area of potential growth.’” Mayor Maxwell stated that, in light of Sand Springs’ action and the fears expressed by other county towns, Tulsa would “define clearly those areas in which Tulsa has an interest.”42

In a late afternoon emergency session, on Friday March 18th, the Tulsa City Commission annexed a fence line around more than 100 square miles of land to

38 Id.; “City to Annex Additional Areas, Toss Out Others, TULSA WORLD, Apr. 18, 1966.

39 Id.

40 Id.

41 Id.

42 Id.
the north, east, and south of the city. An unincorporated area west of Tulsa and east of Sand Springs remained unaffected.43

Mayor Maxwell stated that Sand Springs would no longer be allowed to use TMAPC staff in its planning activities, and that “all agreements between the two cities, including the agreement to provide Tulsa water to Sand Springs on an emergency basis, would be carefully reviewed.”44

Some suburban officials condemned Tulsa’s response, calling it an over-reaction. “We are not here to negotiate,” Maxwell countered. “We are here to do what we have to do to protect the legitimate interests of the city of Tulsa.”

Street Commissioner Robert LaFortune added, “We have been the ‘gentle big brother’ for as long as possible. Tulsa provides many of the metropolitan services which all our communities use. We have very little alternative.”

Though Tulsa officials were careful to point out that the creation of a fence line was not an annexation of the entire area, just seven days later, Tulsa consummated its annexation of all 102.5 square miles of land encompassed by the new fence line.

**City of Tulsa**

**Land Area, 1900-1970**

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44 “City Annexation Barrier Encircles Big Area Here,” TULSA WORLD, Mar. 19, 1966.

45 Id.

46 Id.

In the days and weeks that followed, city officials scrambled to reassure residents – both old and new – that the city government was up to the task of providing adequate municipal services to newly incorporated areas.

Tulsa officials quickly proposed a cooperative agreement between city and county officials to serve the new city areas. Police Commissioner Bennie Garren stated that he had contacted county and state law enforcement officials, who had agreed to maintain their operations in the annexed areas.

A week after the massive expansion, Fire Chief Stanley Hawkins stated that the annexation “created immediate and costly needs if adequate fire protection [was to be] assured.” Among the short-term needs he identified were:

- construction of two new fire stations,
- drastic changes in fire response assignments, and
- the purchase of three mobile units to battle grass fires in difficult-to-access area.

Mayor Maxwell estimated that the city would incur a gross revenue loss of $400,000, because of decreased water and sewer charges in the annexed area. But, he said, that loss would be off-set by increases in the city’s tax base. He also indicated that the city would seek additional millage from the excise board to finance increased service levels.

In truth, the city would struggle to provide adequate services in the vast annexed area for years to come – extending well past Mayor Maxwell’s term in office.


49 Id.


51 Id. Local officials also cited a potential benefit of city fire service for residents in the newly incorporated area. According to the Manager of the Oklahoma Inspection Bureau, new Tulsa residents could expect lower fire insurance rates.


A more realistic assessment was offered a few weeks later, when County Assessor Roy Smith, Street Commissioner Robert LaFortune, and City attorney Charles Norman addressed the Tulsa Real Estate Board. LaFortune said that city services – such as streets, traffic engineering, refuse disposal, utilities, and inspections – “are within reach of the city, but will come with difficulty due to budgetary problems.”

Before 1966, the city maintained a policy “against taking in areas where residents [were] without financial resources to pay for improvements.” Tulsa’s mid-century Annexation Procedure described very specific “minimum requirements for annexation.” For an area to be considered for annexation, it had to first meet the following minimum standards:

(a) That said area contains a minimum of approximately fifty per cent (50%) development.

(b) That all streets in said area have been graded to within at least six (6) inches of the proposed grade line of said street . . . .

(c) That all streets in said subdivision have been well oiled or graveled.

(d) That permanent culverts or other drainage structures of sufficient capacity . . . have been installed under and across all streets, and that all creeks, ditches, or water ways across private property shall have been opened, straightened, cleaned and otherwise improved . . . .

(e) That all sanitary sewers have been installed or that a proper petition for the installation of same has accompanied the petition for annexation . . . .


56 Tulsa Revised Ordinances, Title 6, Ch. 2, §§ 13, 14 (1945); see also Tulsa Revised Ordinances, Title 9, Ch. 2, § 200 et seq (2005) (including exception for annexations initiated by city officials).
Moreover, if water service in the area did not conform to Water Department specifications, “the subdivision owners shall make application to the Water Department of the City of Tulsa to procure said water services which shall meet city specifications for such work and said owners shall pay for such work.”

Commissioner LaFortune conceded, however, that by annexing 102.5 square miles “to protect our growth area,” Tulsa had “picked up some lesser developed areas too.” Providing services to these areas would prove to be an enduring challenge for the city.

Though Tulsa’s massive expansion dominated metro-area annexation news in 1966, among other highlights of this year:

- The Tulsa Annexation Committee, made up of city department heads, proposed that the city “de-annex” four large industrial tracts, including the Texaco refinery, PSO’s power plant, American Airlines’ maintenance base, and Air Force Plant No. 3. “The disannexations are a matter of economics,” said Commissioner LaFortune. He estimated that the city would lose approximately $60,000 in water revenue should these areas – which had their own fire and security forces – remain inside city limits.

- Broken Arrow joined the “municipal land-fencing contest” in the summer of 1966, by annexing a strip of land surrounding 40 square miles southeast of Tulsa’s new city limits and north of the Arkansas River. Broken Arrow also added a strip of land extending two miles into Wagoner County.

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[57] *Id.* Annexations also required the written approval of the Tulsa City Planning Commission, the City Engineer, and the Superintendent of the Water Department.

[58] *Id.* The city reserved a right to annex areas that did not conform to these requirements (§ 16).


1967 through 1972

Tulsa’s land-area growth stabilized in the years following the largest land expansion in Tulsa’s history. The city added just one more square mile in the five years following the 1966 annexation. In 1972, Tulsa maintained a total land area of 175.71 square miles.

During this period, city officials were occupied by the struggle to extend city services to all parts of the city, and by a push by some Tulsa industries to de-annex, as a way to reduce their property tax rates.

In 1969, a house fire near 101st and Memorial prompted accusations that the city was not providing adequate services to newly annexed areas. The nearest hydrant to the burning house was almost four miles away. “There’s no water out here – we couldn’t do anything if we wanted to but let it burn,” District 5 Fire Chief Ben Lundy said at the scene.62

Water and Sewer Commissioner R.L. Langenheim acknowledged that funds were not available to extend city water service to all new areas of the city. Assistant Water and Sewer Superintendent John Wheatley concurred. “To get water to these areas that are far beyond present urban development, the costs would be staggering.”63

Police and Fire Commissioner Brad Scheer acknowledged that emergency services were also stretched too thin. “We annexed so much territory – why, I don’t know – but I don’t like it a bit,” he said. “We’re not able to provide adequate police protection to that area, either.” The Tulsa Police Department had only one squad car covering approximately 20 square miles of the annexed area.64

62 “Large Annexed Area Lacks Fire Hydrants, Inadequate Police Protection Also Reported,” TULSA TRIBUNE, Feb. 1, 1969. Further aggravating matters, it was a long-distance call for residents of the area to call the fire department.

63 Id.

64 Id.
Robert LaFortune explained that the City Commission abandoned Tulsa’s long-standing conservative approach to annexation, in 1966, in response to the expansion plans of Sand Springs, Broken Arrow, and Bixby. “We decided to draw a line around what we thought were natural parts of the city.”

Mayor James Hewgley agreed. Though he was not in office at the time, he said the annexation was a response to a direct threat by Sand Springs and “an implied threat that Broken Arrow and Bixby would impede Tulsa’s growth.” “I don’t think anyone really wanted to do this, but our relationships were so poor with the other communities.”

Also during this period, several industrial facilities either opposed annexation plans, or asked to be removed from city limits. In 1967, the City Commission declined to annex land occupied by the National Tank Company and Wheatley Industries, located near Charles Page Boulevard between Tulsa and Sand Springs. Ed Dubie, a former executive of the Sand Springs home interests, which owned much of the affected property, spoke against the annexation proposal. He indicated that such a move would raise property tax rates and might cause the National Tank Company to move its operations out of state. Since the Sand Springs Home interests owned the property, he said, the Commission would be “taking bread out of the mouths of 200 orphans.”

A few months later, the City Commission refused to de-annex approximately 5,700 acres east of Tulsa International Airport. Street Commissioner LaFortune, then head of the city’s Annexation Committee, said the property would be “related significantly to the development of the Port of Tulsa, nine miles northeast of the airport.”

In 1969, VB Products, a local aerospace firm, asked the City Commission to de-annex its 10-acre site at the Tulsa International Airport. The firm’s president said that he was seeking de-annexation “because property on which American

65 Id.

66 Id.


Airlines, North American Rockwell Corporation and McDonnell Douglas Tulsa divisions built had been de-annexed.”

Among the other annexation highlights from 1967 through 1972:

- City officials indicated that they would “vigorously oppose” legislation proposed by Tulsa State Senator Gene Howard, which would require de-annexation of areas in cities where municipal services “customarily and ordinarily provided” are not, in fact, available. The legislation could have removed a large portion of the area annexed in 1966 from city limits.

- In 1971, as construction of new homes in the area proceeded at a fast clip, the TRIBUNE continued to speculate that Gilcrease Hills subdivisions might be annexed, notwithstanding the practical problems raised by extending Tulsa into Osage County. In fact, the TRIBUNE posited, Osage County boundaries might be altered to exclude this area. The paper cited a recent opinion by the Oklahoma Attorney General, concluding that federal and state laws protecting the Osage Nation’s land and mineral interests presented no barrier to changing the boundaries of Osage County.

1973

In 1973 – with the immediate effects of the 1966 annexation fading – the City Commission would once again unveil a grand annexation plan, provoking still more conflict with surrounding communities. This time, the Commission’s closely guarded plan would protect areas of “balanced growth” to the north, while not incurring the immediate costs of providing city services.

In May, a group of landowners offered incentives of donations of land to encourage annexation into the southeast corner of Osage County. The land donations – for the Gilcrease Expressway, residential streets, parks, and other public facilities – were intended to off-set any tax revenue that might be foregone.

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due to millage disparities between counties. Officials acknowledged that annexation into Osage County, which had been discussed for several years, would create practical problems. But, they said, it would also encourage more “balanced growth,” a stated goal of city officials.  

Mayor LaFortune urged the city’s Annexation Committee to “develop the economic data on the operating departments and other considerations,” and make a report to the City Commission.

The Osage County annexation proposal would quickly gain momentum, under the supervision of Street Commissioner Sid Patterson, and other areas would be included as well.

On July 7, 1973, Tulsa extended its city limits into two new counties, by establishing a 70 feet-wide “fence-line” around approximately 77 square miles of land in Tulsa, Osage, and Rogers Counties. “The action was hailed as a way to bring about planned, orderly development and to balance the city growth pattern by heading away from the southeastern sprawl.”

The primary advantage of the creation of the fence line, according to city officials, was to preserve “an area for orderly future growth by Tulsa without presently burdening Tulsa with the provision of full city services.”

“Negotiations for the moves apparently were prompted by several factors, including the pledge of the City Commission through Mayor Robert LaFortune’s Vision 2000 program to work for balancing the city’s growth by encouraging development to the north, west and other undeveloped areas.”

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73 Id.


City officials announced that about 4,000 acres, encompassing the Port of Catoosa and the adjacent industrial park, had been annexed outright. It was soon discovered, however, that the legal description approved by the Commission only created a fence-line around the Port property; it was not annexed in its entirety.77

Nevertheless, Tulsa’s “fence-building” prompted the quick condemnation of suburban officials – particularly Claremore officials and Rogers County Commissioners.

Two weeks after the City Commission’s action, the Rogers County Commission filed suit in Rogers County District Court, seeking to stop the move. Associate District Judge Ed Cardon quickly issued a temporary restraining order preventing Tulsa from acting on its fence-line annexation.78

In their lawsuit, Rogers County officials contended that the annexation would “usurp the power of and jurisdiction of the Claremore-Rogers County Metropolitan Area Planning Commission, which currently enforces zoning in the affected area.”79

In August, Tulsa and Rogers County officials announced a truce, and asked the judge for more time to resolve their differences. After Tulsa agreed to alter the fence-line boundaries slightly, and to accommodate a role for Claremore and Rogers County at the Port of Catoosa, Rogers County withdrew its lawsuit.80

Among other highlights of 1973:

- In April, residents of an area between 81st and 91st Streets South, and between Peoria and the West Bank of the Arkansas River, submitted a petition to the City Commission asking to be de-annexed. The petition was prompted by concerns over Tulsa’s ability to provide public services – particularly police

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and fire protection – as efficiently as Jenks could provide them. The city’s Annexation Committee would vote against this proposal in 1976, but current maps show it as part of Jenks.

1974-1980

Soon after the dust had settled on the 1973 fence-line annexation, residents and city officials began discussing the annexation of property in Osage County. In January of 1974, five citizen groups circulated petitions seeking annexation of a broad area in southeastern Osage County, including much of Gilcrease Hills.

Soon after, however, another group of residents filed a petition in Osage County District Court, seeking a temporary restraining order to prevent Tulsa officials from annexing any property in Osage County. The Judge issued a restraining order on January 29th, but would lift it two weeks later.

The timing of the legal challenge caused concern among city officials, who worried that it might disrupt a proposed street and expressway bond issue, which was to include approximately $7.5 million for roadwork in the Gilcrease Hills area. Annexation would be a requirement for the expenditure of city funds in this area.

Mayor LaFortune also expressed concern that the challenge could derail the city’s balanced growth initiative, and even disrupt the school district’s plans to relocate Central High School to 33rd West Avenue. The city’s commitment to improve streets in the area was cited as a factor in the school district’s decision.

85 Id.
To resolve the issue, city officials proposed to remove two proposals from the upcoming bond issue, both of which would have required annexations. The city agreed to withdraw its proposal to resurface Apache, between 25th and 33rd West Avenue, and 33rd West Avenue, between Edison and Apache. The resident group accepted the compromise and withdrew its objections.87

In 1975, the Tulsa Metropolitan Area Planning Commission formed a Growth Strategy Task Force, to “advise city and county officials on balanced growth policies.” In June of 1977, the City Commission asked the Task Force to “recommend long range policies for annexation and de-annexation, and to determine whether the city should annex Gilcrease Hills.”88

In September of 1977, the Task Force recommended that the city annex nearly 17 square miles in Osage County. “This is an opportunity for the city to take a major step toward achieving balanced growth in a very critical geographic area, almost at the doorstep of City Hall,” the Task Force’s report stated. “This recommendation was reached based upon the opinion that if the city is to pursue a balanced growth philosophy, then this policy must be translated into action.”89

The City Commission referred the Task Force’s recommendation to its annexation Committee. Mayor LaFortune stated that the city’s response would be based primarily on the costs to the city associated with annexation.90

In the fall of 1978, City Commissioners voted to annex approximately 2.2 square miles of the 17 proposed. The annexation, though smaller than recommended, finally brought the Gilcrease Hills development into the city.91


89 Id.

90 “Annexation to be Cost-Based, Mayor Says,” TULSA TRIBUNE, Oct. 6, 1977.

Among other annexation highlights during this period:

- In 1976, the Annexation Committee recommended against de-annexing the planned Quail Ridge subdivision, between 41st and 51st Streets and 145th and 161st East Avenues. TMAPC Director Don Osgood said the proposed development would be considerably denser than allowed under Tulsa’s development guidelines.\(^{92}\)

- Also in 1976, the city’s Annexation Committee took under advisement a proposal by Water and Sewer Superintendent C.R. Holden to annex a fence-line from the city limits at 61st Street and 33rd West Avenue, west along 61st to 81st West Avenue, north to the Arkansas River, northeast along the river to 61st West Avenue, and north to the city limits at the Keystone Expressway.\(^{93}\)

- In 1978, and for the second time, the City Commission denied developer Joe “Hubb” Collier’s request for de-annexation. Collier planned to develop nearly 250 acres north of Edison Street, along what would be 73rd West Avenue, but said that city’s requirements for curbs, gutters, and storm sewers would be too expensive on his steep, hilly property.\(^{94}\)

- In 1979, County Commissioner Terry Young proposed de-annexing part of southeast Tulsa (71st to 91st, Delaware to Elwood) to pay for a bridge across the Arkansas River at 71st Street. Young said de-annexation would permit the creation of a special assessment district, which would allow tax-exempt properties, such as Oral Roberts University, to help pay for the bridge. The proposal was “bombarded from all angles” by the city department heads who made up the Annexation Committee.\(^{95}\)

\(^{92}\) “Bid to Disannex Land is Turned Down by Panel,” TULSA TRIBUNE, Jan. 28, 1976.

\(^{93}\) Id.


\(^{95}\) “Ruling Stalled on Disannexation Bid,” TULSA TRIBUNE, Mar. 15, 1979.
1980-1990

In 1980, the Oklahoma legislature enacted a new law prohibiting cities from zoning land outside their boundaries. In August of that year, in anticipation of the new law taking effect, the Tulsa Metropolitan Area Planning Commission recommended that the city annex about 11 square miles in Osage County “to preserve development standards.” (At the time, Osage County had not enacted any zoning standards.)

The city’s Annexation Committee took the TMAPC’s recommendation a step further, suggesting that the city annex approximately 20 square miles in Osage County. The area included in the Committee’s recommendation was bounded roughly by the Osage County line, 72nd West Avenue, and 62nd Street North.

Proponents of the annexation argued that it would keep city planning and development standards in place in this area. Opponents argued that it would “present the city with new bills for public works improvements and other services,” just as city officials were asking voters for a sales tax increase to pay for existing capital needs.

The City Commission ultimately voted to annex just 2 of the 20 square miles of land that were recommended. The annexed area included a half-mile strip along West Edison Street and another along 25th West Avenue. Officials said this compromise would provide a buffer around the Gillcrease Hills development and allow the city to regulate development along Edison Street.

A proposal to take in some of the Osage County land that the Commission declined to annex in 1980 would resurface again in 1982. That year, Tulsa’s Department of City Development proposed a slate of new annexations. Among the Department’s proposals were:

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98 Id.

99 “City Annexes Small Part of Osage County,” TULSA WORLD, Sept. 9, 1980.
• annexation of west side, I-44 motel strip and commercial area, east of the Turner Turnpike gate;

• annexation of a developed area near 65th West Avenue and Edison Street;

• annexation of a 9 square-mile area of Osage County, northwest of Gilcrease Hills, to “illustrate a city commitment to balanced growth”;

• annexation of the Northgate subdivision, between 62nd and 66th Streets North, and Cincinnati Avenue and the Osage County line;

• annexation of a county parcel at 51st Street and Hudson Avenue;

• extending the city’s fence line to include an area south, east, and west of Sperry, and an area in Wagoner County east of the city; and

• extending the city’s fence line to include the Berryhill area (bounded by the Arkansas River on the north, city limits to the east, 61st Street to the south, and Sand Springs corporate limits to the west).100

The Development Department’s report stated that the proposed annexations would “preserve areas for future growth, expand the tax base, allow the city to control land development, and achieve more balanced growth.”101

Of these recommendations, the proposal to extend the city’s fence line into Berryhill raised the most vigorous opposition. In mid-June, “Tulsa County Commissioner Terry Young, Berryhill lawyers Frank Zeigler and Steve Horn, and District 68 Representative Bob Hopkins met with about 50 residents . . . and organized strategies to ‘fight city hall’ over the issue.”102


101 Id.

Some city department heads shared residents’ concerns. Police Chief Harry Stege voiced opposition to all of the annexation proposals. “We can’t do a very good job of taking care of what we have now,” he said, “so why take on more.” City Engineer Harold Miller echoed those sentiments. “We still haven’t covered our butt on what we annexed in ’66,” he said.103

Assistant Fire Chief Paul Dudley indicated that his department had few problems with the annexation proposals, “since the city already provides fire service by contract to most of these areas.” Likewise, the City-County Health Department Director, M.F. Reece, indicated that his agency already served areas outside the city. “I could go either way,” he said.104

Ultimately, the city’s Annexation Committee recommended, by an 8-4 vote, to extend Tulsa’s fence-line to include Berryhill. The Committee also recommended annexation of the I-44 strip, the developed area near 65th West Avenue and Charles Page Boulevard, and the former county home site at 51st and Hudson. The Committee did not recommend annexation of nine square miles in Osage County, the Northgate subdivision, or the area south and west of Sperry.105

Notwithstanding the Committee’s recommendation, Berryhill and the I-44 strip remain outside the city’s fence line.106

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103 “Stege, Other Officials Oppose Annexation, TULSA WORLD, June 27, 1982.

104 Id.

105 “Committee Says City Should ‘Fence’ Berryhill, TULSA WORLD, July 2, 1982.

Among other annexation highlights from 1980 through 1989:

- Among fourteen annexation proposals presented to the city’s Annexation Committee in 1986 were a proposal to annex an area west of the Gilcrease Museum, to prevent the development of a landfill, and a proposal to annex the Tulsa County Fairgrounds. “At a September meeting of the Annexation Committee, Police Chief Bob Dick suggested the annexation of the county fairgrounds to bring in additional sales tax revenue.” But, Street Commissioner J.D. Metcalf added, “there may be little revenue generated after the city closes down all the buildings that violate city codes.”

- Also in 1986, the Annexation Committee discussed “annexing the Cherokee Industrial District as requested by the Metropolitan Tulsa Chamber of Commerce.”

- In 1988, the Annexation Committee recommended that the city annex the northern half of the Suburban Hills neighborhood (between 56th to 61st Street North, Cincinnati and Garrison Avenues). Both residents and city staff stated that annexation of the northern half of the neighborhood would “help consolidate services and stop confusion about where the city begins and ends.”

1990-present

The city’s standing Annexation Committee did not survive the change in the form of city government in 1990. Annexations since the Mayor/Council form of government was approved have not been considered in a regular or systematic way, but on an ad hoc basis.

The city’s largest annexation action since 1966 was the addition of the town of Fair Oaks – 13 square miles with a population of 42.

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107 “Gilcrease Area, Expo Square Key Items in Annexation Requests,” TULSA WORLD, Nov. 11, 1986.

108 Id.

The property owners, the Joe Robson family, cited two primary factors in the decision to request annexation. First, Robson said, the Metro Tulsa Chamber approached the family when companies began looking for sizeable industrial sites.¹¹⁰ “The Fair Oaks Area [was] one of six sites identified by the Metropolitan Tulsa Chamber of Commerce as a possible location for a semiconductor manufacturing plant,” said the Chamber’s Mickey Thompson.¹¹¹ Fair Oaks has little or no infrastructure, “so it’s a wide open area that can be carefully and properly developed.”¹¹²

The second factor prompting the family to request annexation, Robson said, was the completion of the Creek Turnpike loop, which made development of Fair Oaks more attractive.¹¹³

Joe Robson’s grandfather, L.S. Robson, incorporated Fair Oaks in 1966, largely to keep it from being annexed by the City of Tulsa. “It’s kind of ironic, now we’re talking about Tulsa annexing it,” he said.¹¹⁴

The 13 square mile tract is bounded by 193rd East Avenue (the Tulsa/Wagoner County line) to the west, 257th East Avenue to the east, U.S. 412 to the north, and 41st Street to the south.¹¹⁵

**Conclusion**

In just a century, Tulsa has grown from a small, non-descript tribal town at the edge of the Muscogee Nation to a sprawling core city, surrounded by thriving suburban communities.


¹¹³ *Id*.


In 1965, Tulsa was still the quintessential boom town – prosperous and densely developed. 1966 was a watershed year for Tulsa in many respects.

- It saw Tulsa triple its land area overnight.

- It marked the first substantial recognition of the suburbs as competitors to Tulsa – for people, jobs, and land – since the 1920s, when Tulsa outgrew and annexed many small communities.

- It marked a substantial diffusion of municipal resources, from about 57 square miles to nearly 175 square miles.

- It saw the city abandon its strict “minimum requirements for annexation” (requiring, for example, that at least 50% of an area be developed to city standards).

The decision city officials made in 1966 is probably as responsible as any other single act for preventing massive population losses and revenue disparities that have plagued many landlocked core cities.116 Quite simply, we have expanded to accommodate the populations that have migrated outward from the central city.

There is no question, however, that Tulsa’s population retention has come at a cost. Immediately after 1966, and still today, officials have bemoaned the costs of serving areas farther and farther out from that original town site perched above the Arkansas.

We continue to struggle with that difficult balance – between accommodating and benefiting from migrating populations and economic development, on the one hand, and conserving and maximizing municipal resources, on the other.

116 Sec, e.g., Charles Shaw, “Gateway Bypass, Can St. Louis Survive in the Post-Industrial Era?” The Next American City (www.americancity.org/Archives/Issue5/shaw.htm) (In the last half of the 20th Century, “more than half a million people left St. Louis in post-war suburbanization and white flight. By the 2000 Census, St. Louis was the 48th largest city in the nation, dropping 40 places in almost as many years.” ** “But all around [the 62-square-mile city] grows St. Louis County, a very nice suburban metropolis of nearly three million people, the 18th largest in the nation.”)

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METROPOLITAN
TULSA AREA CORPORATE LIMITS
TERRITORIAL AND JURISDICTIONAL LIMITS
2004

NOTE:
THIS MAP IS UPDATED ANNUALLY AND CHANGES MAY OCCUR AFTER THE DATE OF PUBLICATION.
THEREFORE, AREAS IN QUESTION SHOULD BE VERIFIED AT THE RECO Office.

May 2004
PREPARED BY ENGLI

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