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SHIFT AND LARGE CROWDS AS
OU MOVES TO SEC





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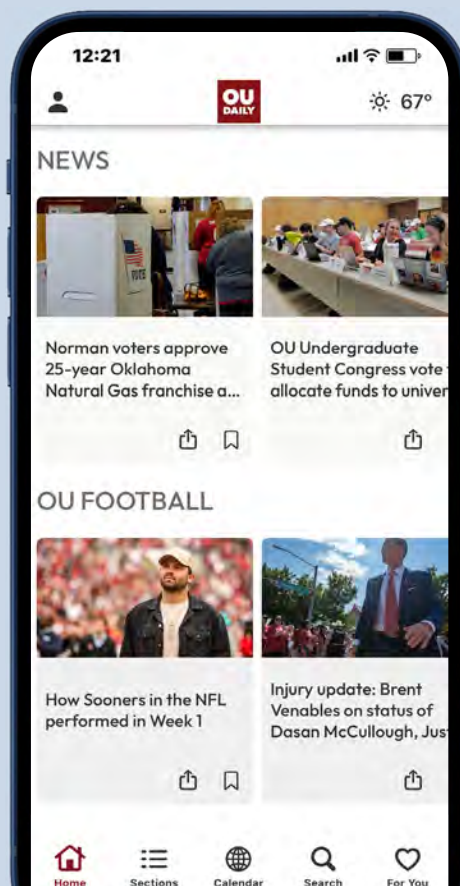
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A NEW ERA FOR **NORMAN**

**OU, city officials prepare for large
SEC crowds and economic shift**

Colton Sulley

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Oklahoma's first game of the 2023 season marked the beginning of the end of its time in the Big 12 Conference.

On the cusp of a new era, it was also the first time since 2017 that fans were allowed to tailgate on Lindsey Street. With very few opposing fans and an 11 a.m. kickoff, the game was a tough sell and the new tailgating zones flopped.

In 2023, OU is hosting its six traditional home games, a relatively lackluster slate that has brought Arkansas State, SMU and Iowa State to Norman, with UCF, West Virginia and TCU coming later.

From Evans Hall to city hall, OU and city leaders are determined that 2024 — when OU transitions to the Southeastern Conference and gets a rare seventh game in Norman — will look different. Compounding that excitement is the fact that along with nonconference matchups with Temple, Tulane, Maine and Houston, the Sooners will host marquee conference games against Alabama, South Carolina and Tennessee. Norman officials expect the road traveling parties for OU football games in the SEC to at least double and maybe even triple.

The current average economic impact for Norman during an OU football weekend: \$11 million.

The current average economic impact for Tuscaloosa during an Alabama football weekend: \$30+ million.

While Tuscaloosa city officials refer to the boost in the Crimson Tide's economy as "the Saban effect," it serves as a blueprint for Norman's leaders to follow and to see what is possible in the conference for a town that houses a blue blood program.

"It's very safe to say that (the number of visitors is) going to be significantly higher in 2024 than what we've experienced in the last few years," Scott Martin, president and CEO of Norman Chamber of Commerce, told the OU Daily. "In the past, it has been kind of a one-off big game.

"In addition to these great traditional rivalries we've had with other colleges and universities, even in state, I mean, our in-state rival (Oklahoma State) is always great. Great game, great experience, all those things. But just to have consistently more fantastic games and

rivalries is going to be really neat."

Research from Learfield's 2021 Intercollegiate Fan Report shows there are more college sports fans in the United States than there are for any professional league. Over 182 million individuals across all 50 states have a favorite college team or teams that they follow regularly. Of the teen and adult population, age 12 and older, 65.5% identify as college sports fans. By comparison, 64% identify themselves as fans of the NFL, the most popular professional league.

The popularity of college sports — and the revenue they generate — was the driving force for Oklahoma and Texas to bolt a year early from the Big 12 to the SEC in time for its \$3 billion television deal with ESPN. The universities, which the Big 12 announced in February would forgo \$100 million from the conference under an agreement to leave early, will suffer a lesser financial impact than originally thought.

OU, per its top leaders, couldn't wait any longer to secure a more stable future.

Since 2005, USA Today has tracked revenue and expenses for more than 230 public NCAA Division I schools. In data covering the 2022 fiscal year, published in April, OU was one of just 12 schools to be self-sustaining.

Five are from the SEC (LSU, Texas A&M, Kentucky, Arkansas and Mississippi State), four from the Big Ten (Ohio State, Penn State, Nebraska and Purdue) and three from the Big 12 (Texas, Kansas State and Oklahoma).

Of those 12, in the most recently available data, OU's margin of self-sufficiency was the narrowest, at \$1,322,760. By comparison, the top revenue-generating program, Ohio State, was \$25,881,927 in the black.

With the move, OU President Joseph Harroz Jr. has said the university will avoid passing along to students part of the burden of helping underwrite the Sooners' athletic successes. Furthermore, not only do SEC institutions benefit from being in the conference, but their host cities get transformed economically, which Norman officials are preparing for less than a year from the transition. In Tennessee's economic impact and community benefits report from 2016, an average football game weekend reflected an average of \$42 million, almost four times the average economic impact Norman sees on a given weekend.

Leaders will tell you there's work to be done to get Norman where it needs to

be, but the city, its officials and the university are proactively working toward improvements — not just for next year, but for decades to come.

"You get one time to make a first impression," Martin said. "So, we've got to work really hard to be prepared next summer and next fall when these guests come to town."

More visiting fans expected

One thing officials are sure of is that SEC fans travel.

The minimum ticket allotment for the conference is much greater than it is for the Big 12. It requires at least 5,000 visiting tickets, including 2,000 in the lower level of its stadiums.

The Big 12 requires each home school to provide a minimum of 2,500 tickets for visiting Big 12 teams. For years, OU relied on nonconference and some conference schools to give back tickets for the school to resell, which the SEC does not allow.

More visitors means more business for Norman. Daniel Schemm, Visit Norman's executive director, is already seeing this in his team's projections.

"They're coming and they're spending double, which means double the sales tax as well," Schemm told the OU Daily. "For those big games also, you have more visiting fans coming. So more visiting fans here means more restaurants and more food.

"The visitors stay longer than someone coming from Edmond. So if you're coming from Ohio State or Alabama or Georgia or wherever, you're coming longer, you're experiencing more because it's more of a vacation and an experience, you're spending more money while you're here."

The city saw this during high-profile home nonconference matchups with Notre Dame in 2012, Tennessee in 2014, Ohio State in 2016 and Nebraska in 2021.

For example, Schemm says the typical average daily hotel rate for any given game weekend in Norman was \$189. When the Buckeyes came to town, that number jumped to \$400.

Talking to Norman hoteliers this summer when OU's 2024 conference schedule was released, Schemm says projections already show rates will double or triple in some cases. Currently, OU fans from around the state make up a lot of the travel to Norman for a game weekend.

The SEC will bring more visitors from



ADEN CHOATE/OU DAILY

Campus Corner packed with OU fans on the morning of the Arkansas State football game.

the opponents' turf.

Lawrence McKinney, president and CEO of the Norman Economic Development Coalition, and his wife, Elizabeth, see tremendous potential in Norman and the opportunity the SEC move presents to the city.

It's why they, along with other city leaders, unveiled plans for a \$1 billion entertainment district at Rock Creek Road and 24th Avenue Northwest to host OU basketball games and gymnastics meets, as well as other events. The proposed plan will be debated by city council this fall with a vote expected to come before the end of 2023 or in early 2024.

"(I'm) very excited," OU athletic director Joe Castiglione said. "(If it passes), it becomes a hub. A hub for activity, a hub for new jobs, a hub for attracting people to live, work and play in Oklahoma. And for us, a state-of-the-art sports venue that highlights our three teams — men's and women's basketball and women's gymnastics — but also puts us in the forefront to go after some other NCAA championship events."

Lawrence has over 35 years of economic development experience in Georgia and Florida, but says Norman is a unique challenge. City leaders and residents have been at odds for years not only over a new arena but also the

broader direction of Norman.

"What's held a lot of the community back," Elizabeth told the OU Daily, "Is it's really hard when we want things the same. People who have been here a long time, we like it how it is, (change is hard)."

The cKinneys, as well as other Norman leaders, have other SEC schools to learn from. For instance, Missouri and Texas A&M, who departed the Big 12 for the SEC in 2012, serve as a study on transitioning to the conference.

While studying different SEC schools, an area that OU is found to be lacking in is its homecoming parade. The cKinneys arrived in Tuscaloosa on Oct. 22 for Alabama's matchup with Mississippi State with no inkling about just how busy campus would be during the Crimson Tide's homecoming.

"It lasted at least an hour longer," Lawrence told the OU Daily. "There were so many more activities and floats and stuff in this thing. It was just in the community pride and in the spirit."

When they arrived back in Norman, Lawrence passed this along to OU and heard that as long as the Sooners were in the Big 12, most of their games would kick off at 11 a.m. This year, that has led OU to move its homecoming parade to Friday night.

Another factor to consider with the

expected influx of SEC fans is Norman's location and how accessible travel would be.

Compared to other SEC towns, Norman is unique in that its football stadium sits about 3 miles from a major interstate. It also has features both metro and rural areas contain, being about 20 miles south of Oklahoma City.

An additional rarity is that OU's football stadium sits less than 4 miles from Max Westheimer Airport, a complex adjacent to the new proposed basketball/gymnastics venue, and one officials envision upgrading in the years ahead.

Campus Corner

As the north entry to the university, Campus Corner is an area many see with high potential for improvements. Lawrence says Fortune 100 companies around the country are interested in Norman, with the historic neighborhood as "a focal point."

"We've got some nice businesses, some quaint businesses," Lawrence said. "It does well, but it doesn't do well year-round and it is the entrance to the university, right? So, the doorstep of the university needs a serious upgrade."

"It needs upgrades on its infrastructure, the roads, the sidewalks, the lighting. Certainly, the businesses could look and feel different than what they do today, with more restaurants, bars, specialty shops and so there (are) some plans in the works."

However, Team Norman has also discussed a "Campus Corner remake," in other locations around the city. According to Lawrence, if Griffin Memorial Hospital is relocated, there will be 696 acres of land up for purchase northeast of campus. He envisions this as a potential location, but it is currently unclear what would replace the hospital.

On Sept. 11, the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse announced that it will construct a new behavioral health hospital on the Oklahoma State University-Oklahoma City campus replacing Griffin as the state's primary mental health hospital.

Lawrence says those he's working with are "close" to figuring out where they fit in with the potential offices for the Griffin and expects an update by the end of the year.

The main message from Norman's leaders is that Campus Corner needs more.

"We've got the bones and a really great historic downtown," Martin said.

"But we need more. ... Our downtown Campus Corner area needs to be a priority for everybody. We always need to be looking for more unique restaurants and shopping opportunities. An area that I think we could really excel in and that we could improve in is live music.

"Most of the places we visited had some fantastic live music on the Friday night before the home football game. And so we've got some, but I think we all agree we need more entertainment and things like that around these games."

One of the economic coalition's main priorities is figuring out how to keep OU students spending their dollars in Norman instead of going to concerts or bars in Oklahoma City or Tulsa. Lawrence is hopeful Campus Corner will see improvements in the near future.

After releasing master plans for the west and east sides of the city, the next step is to put together a master plan for the south side, which includes Campus Corner.

"I do think you're going to see some new things down there," Lawrence said. "Businesses are going to come in and I'm sure they're going to do well there but it's not as big as it should be in terms of things to do that are year-round."

Max Westheimer Airport

Another unique feature of Norman and OU compared to current SEC schools is the closeness of an airport to campus.

The airport isn't fit to welcome commercial flights or team jets, but is the base for traveling fans to fly in privately. Lance Lamkin, the airport's administrator, expects a significant increase in air traffic with OU's move to the SEC.

Currently, the airport sees an average of 25 to 45 aircraft flying in specifically for a football contest in the Big 12 against a conference opponent that is unranked and not a rival.

When Nebraska traveled to Norman in 2021, Lamkin said there were 70 to 90 flights throughout the day. While he has no way of predicting SEC crowds, he expects the number will be similar.

"All I know is that there will be more," Lamkin told the OU Daily. "The trend that we've seen is the bigger the games, the more people that are going to come to the college and come to Norman to attend the game here. I won't even try to guess on it. I've contacted several different airport managers and other SEC towns across the southeast and there's just no way of knowing the traffic until

until it gets here."

Rep. Tom Cole (R-Okla.) of Oklahoma's 4th Congressional District has backed legislation requesting over \$36 million in upgrades to Westheimer, which would bring more runways and better infrastructure ahead of the influx of SEC fans.

"We're just trying to capture the biggest market we can and the only way to do that is to expand our runway a little bit longer and beef up the runway to be able to handle the heavier aircraft," Lamkin said. "And (Cole's) bill will help us do that and that bill will also help us expand our hangar development areas, which has been greatly needed out here at the airport, for at least the last two decades."

'It's a new day'

OU athletics is working in real time on game days to improve its game day operations.

This includes adjusting its tailgating strategy, which improved along Lindsey during Week 2 with the addition of speakers, increased advertising and finding a signature song to play during the game to increase fan engagement. OU also installed upgraded LED lights last season to put on light shows like other SEC schools have for years.

Traveling to various road sites during the season also offers insight into game day improvements. When the Sooners defeated Cincinnati 20-6 on the road on Sept. 23, Nippert Stadium's crowd of 38,193, less than half of what Gaylord Family-Oklahoma Memorial Stadium holds, affected the game.

The Sooners' end zone student section was supplied with thunder sticks and the crowd was prepared with organized chants.

Castiglione and head coach Brent Venables are going to continue doing what they can to ensure OU competes on the football field, while city leaders work to get Norman ready.

The announcement of the entertainment district was a step in the right direction to them, however, only time will tell if it passes or spurs greater change.

"It's a new day," Elizabeth said. "We're all competing on every different level. OU is competing in football and to get the best, the best professors and researchers and students to come to their school. We're competing for talent.

"In everything, there's a theme of competition there. Every community around us and every state is competing. So if we don't get in the game and change our mindset about why it is important to evolve, we're left behind."



A festival attendee brings his baby out of an airplane at the 17th annual OU Aviation Festival at Max Westheimer Airport.

ANDI ANTHONY/OU DAILY



AUDREY QUAN/OU DAILY

Olivia Bledsoe has lived at Campus Lodge since 2020. Bledsoe discusses her struggle to afford the cost of living as rent increases.

RISING RENT CONCERNS

Norman residents fear anticipated housing cost surge

BY ALEXIA ASTON • ALEXIAASTON@OU.EDU

The Southeastern Conference is described as one of the most lucrative conferences in the U.S., garnering 30 national college football titles since it was established in 1933, the most championships won by a single conference.

Earlier this year, OU announced it would transition to the SEC in 2024, a year sooner than its initial agreement, exemplifying the university's desire to quickly reap the benefits the SEC presents. The SEC only falls

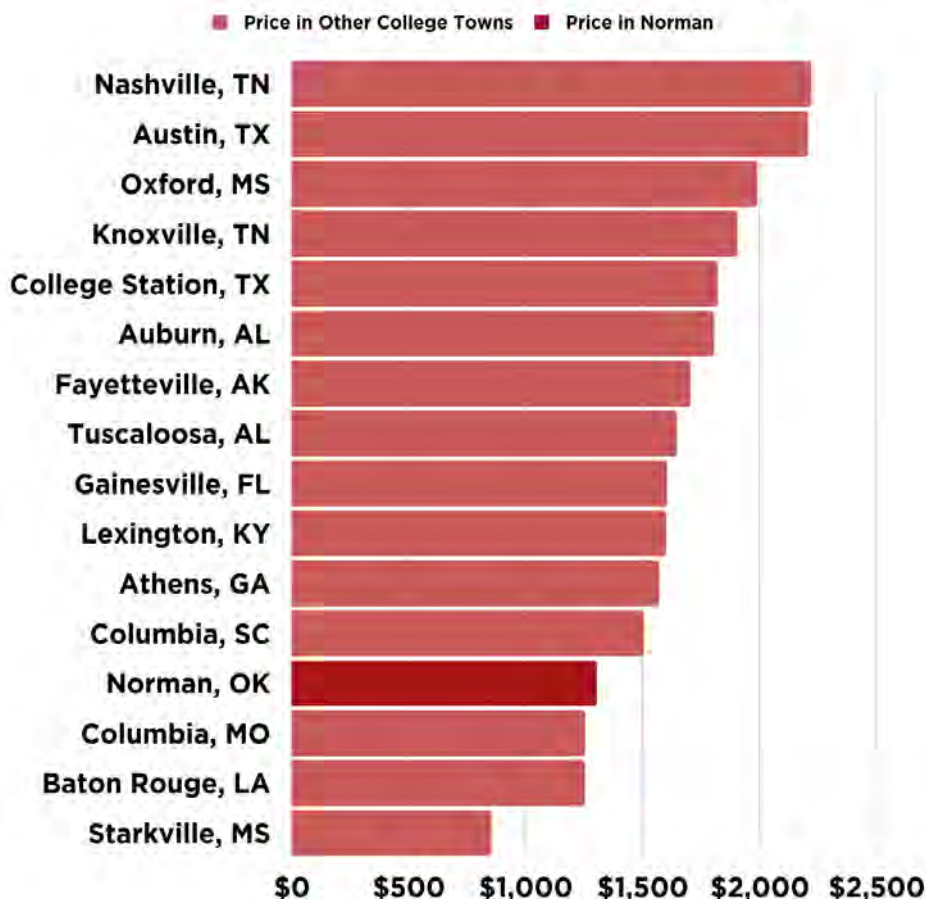
behind the Big 10 in per-school payouts, delivering in 2022 each of its members \$49.9 million while the Big 10 delivered \$58.8 million to each school except Nebraska, Maryland and Rutgers.

While OU, its athletics department and its administration gear up for the historic move, students are impacted as living in Norman becomes more expensive, a trend expected to accelerate in the new conference.

Norman Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Scott Martin told OU Daily the conference has some of the most loyal fans, driving viewership, attendance and economic opportunity in SEC college towns.

Last year, Martin visited three SEC universities — Alabama, Arkansas and Kentucky — during their home football weekends with a subcommittee comprised of fellow Norman officials, economic development

Median rent in cities with a 2024 SEC university



HANNAH LEE/OU DAILY

The median rent prices depicted in the graph reflect those on Zillow as of Sept. 27.

specialists and marketing strategists.

On the subcommittee's visits, they saw significantly more apartments, hotels, mixed-use housing and multi-family housing in those cities than in Norman, Martin said.

As of Sept. 27, The median rent for all bedrooms and property types in Norman was \$1,300, according to Zillow.

The median rent for the 16 cities with universities that will be in the SEC next year was \$1,621, as of Sept. 27. Twelve of the 16 cities' median rent was more expensive than in Norman.

In Austin, Texas, the median rent was 69% higher than in Norman, as of Sept. 27. It was 31% higher in Fayetteville, Arkansas; 26% higher in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and 23% higher in Lexington, Kentucky.

Martin said OU's move to the SEC would contribute to additional increases in rent across Norman.

Meanwhile, some students struggle to afford the city's current rental prices.

Olivia Bledsoe remembers resorting to ramen or popcorn for dinner to save money despite her iron deficiency. She needed the extra money to pay rent at her apartment in Norman.

When she moved into Campus Lodge on Beaumont Drive in 2020, her rent was about \$360 per month. Bledsoe now pays over \$500 each month.

For apartment complexes that market to OU students, residents typically sign individual leases for a bedroom, a bathroom and a shared living space. At Campus Lodge, the rate for a unit with four bedrooms and four bathrooms is \$529 a month per resident, meaning all four residents in a unit pay \$2,116 collectively.

OU Daily compiled rental rates per resident for four-bedroom, four-bathroom units across popular student apartment

complexes in Fayetteville, Arkansas; Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and Lexington, Kentucky, that utilize the same leasing structure as those in Norman.

Norman:

Millennium: \$590-\$615
Callaway House: \$859-\$999
The Flats at Norman: \$565

Fayetteville, Arkansas:

The Locale: \$865
The Cardinal at West Center: \$719-\$839
University House: \$819-\$839

Tuscaloosa, Alabama:

The Crimson: \$669
State on Campus: \$849-\$999
Hub Tuscaloosa: \$1,069-\$1,129

Lexington, Kentucky:

Hub Lexington: \$940-\$975
The Stretch: \$659
5 Twenty Four and 5 Twenty
Five Angliana: \$639

Bledsoe started at OU in 2019 before she transitioned to online classes at Redlands Community College to earn her associate's degree in liberal arts.

Bledsoe worked 32 hours per week for \$12 an hour at a local business. She paid \$450 for rent each month during this time. She also had student loans to pay off, which were an additional \$450 a month, leaving her with \$159 for gas and food each week.

"It was very hard," Bledsoe said. "It was literally paycheck to paycheck."

She said the financial stress compounded her already existing mental health issues. She relied on financial assistance from her family, mostly her aunt, she said.

"(It was) the pressure of, 'What if I have to ask my parents for help again?' Then thoughts of, 'Am I a disappointment?'" Bledsoe said.

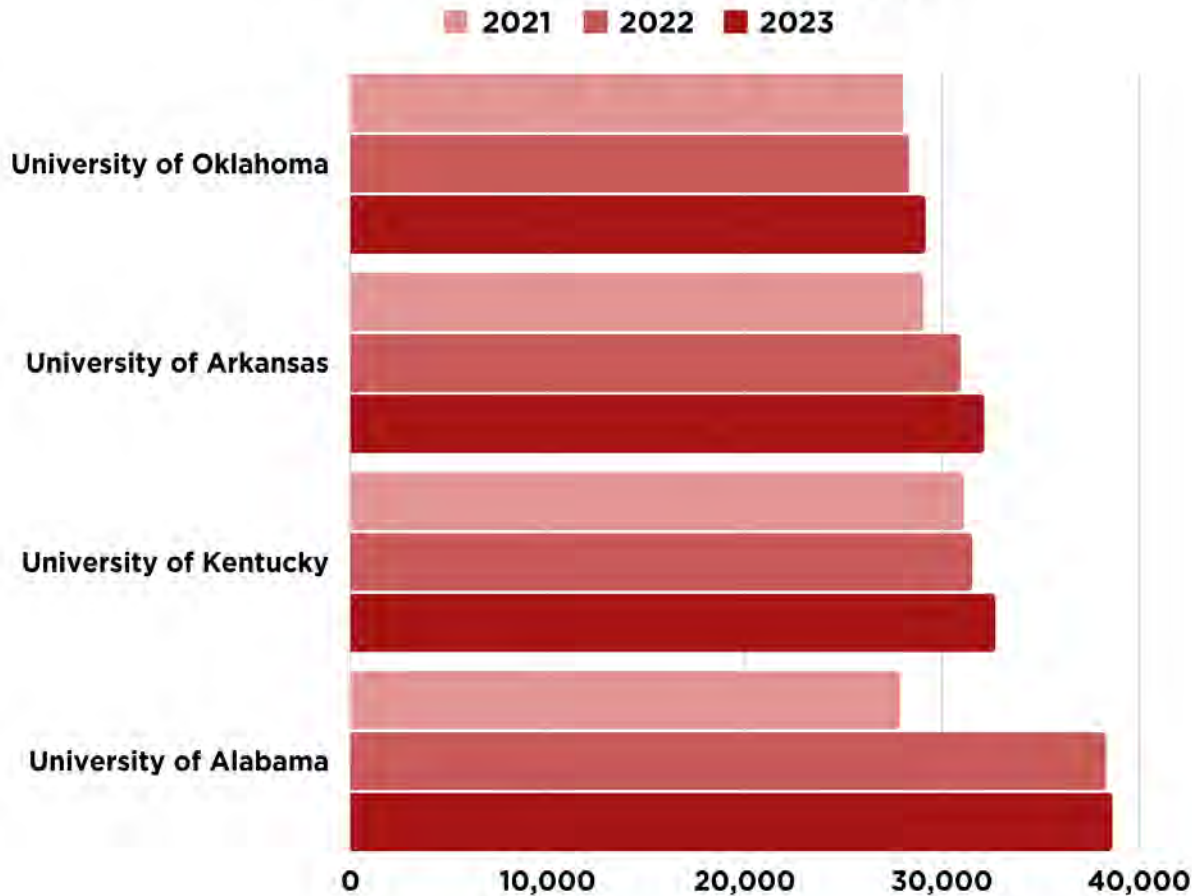
Bledsoe's hourly wage was above Oklahoma's minimum wage but below a living wage in the state.

Oklahoma's minimum wage is \$7.25, which follows the federal minimum wage law. According to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's living wage calculator, a living wage in Oklahoma for an adult with no children is \$15.49 an hour.

The living wage calculator's estimate of living wage includes food, child care, health care, housing, transportation, civic engagement, broadband and other necessities. It also accounts for the additional cost to families associated with income and payroll taxes.

Bledsoe now works in the OU Center for Public Management where she makes \$16 an hour, which she said alleviates some of

Fall enrollment totals by year



CONNIE WIGGINS/OU DAILY

the pressure.

She hopes to return to OU after she earns her associate's degree to pursue international studies.

For Will Bouchard, a management information systems junior, making \$12 an hour is hardly enough to cover rent and other living expenses.

He works 30 hours a week at a fast food chain to make ends meet while taking 13 credit hours. His hourly pay, however, is \$3.49 below the state's living wage.

Bouchard currently pays about \$440 in rent at Campus Lodge each month, which he said is almost \$100 more than what he paid two years ago when he first signed a lease at the complex.

This fall is Bouchard's first semester back at OU after taking a year off from school due to mental health issues that were exacerbated by being a full-time student and working over 30 hours a week at a local restaurant.

"It was a very high-demand job," Bouchard said. "My grades dropped after that. Then, I wasn't able to do classes and

work at the same time that fall semester."

Danielle Dunn, the director of communications at OU's Office of Admissions and Recruitment, wrote that students must consider housing and food costs in their financial plans to attend college.

She wrote being able to obtain enough financial aid to cover off-campus rent is a concern for many OU students.

"OU recognizes attending college is a big investment and living expenses are a large piece of that cost," Dunn wrote. "OU encourages all students who may be having difficulties affording rent to contact the Student Financial Center to see what resources may be available for them."

At the OU Board of Regents meeting in September, OU President Joseph Harroz Jr. said fewer and fewer people are pursuing a university-level education in the country, and OU needs to be aware of how to market itself amid this trend.

According to a New York Times article, 74% of young adults believed a college education was very important last decade. Now,

that number has dropped to 41%. Some people say pursuing higher education is not worth the price tag.

Harroz told OU Daily that people want the best value degree.

This year, OU raised tuition and fees for in-state students for the second time in three years and for the third time for out-of-state students. Harroz said OU has maintained staying affordable despite these tuition hikes.

OU is nearly 6% cheaper on average for an in-state student than it was five years ago, Harroz said. He said it is about 1% more expensive on average for out-of-state students in that time frame.

Thirty percent of Bouchard's monthly income goes to his rent, classifying him as cost-burdened, like 46.92% of Norman renters who are low- or moderate-income, according to a presentation from the city at a Norman City Council town hall in October 2022.

Bouchard said while he took time off of school, he worked hard to address his



AUDREY QUAN/OU DAILY

Campus Lodge is one of many apartment complexes in Norman marketed to college students.

mental health struggles, but he's worried that with a full class load and 30 hours of work a week, he'll slip back into an unhealthy mental state.

"No matter where you are, you're gonna have to always put in the work to maintain the progress you've made," Bouchard said. "If there are all these extra stressors, and having to think about where I might have to move next semester if they keep trying to raise my rent, then it just makes it all harder. I don't think it's ever impossible, but it's hard."

City Manager Darrel Pyle said during the town hall that there are 44,915 households in Norman. Of those, over 19,000 are at or below 80% of the area's median income of \$59,866, making them qualify as affordable housing. This means Norman is about 9,000 affordable housing units short of demand, Pyle said.

Martin said Norman is lacking in all areas of housing, causing the city's current supply to be more expensive.

He said he expects rent to increase in Norman due to growing demand,

specifically based on the number of first-year students enrolling at OU each year. For the last three years, OU's first-year classes have broken enrollment number records.

The increase in the student body population reflects the growing student population in SEC cities, Martin said.

Enrollment at the University of Arkansas has increased all but one year since 2002, according to the Fayetteville Flyer. This fall, Arkansas reported its highest-ever fall enrollment with 32,140 students, according to the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette.

The University of Alabama announced a record 39,623 total students.

This fall, the University of Kentucky welcomed a record total of 34,070 students.

As OU transitions to the SEC, Martin said the anticipated population growth and housing demand in Norman are significant. To ensure rental prices in Norman don't get out of hand, the city needs continued growth in the rental market, he said.

In early September, Team Norman, a group of city and university leaders, proposed a \$1 billion entertainment

district at Rock Creek Road and 24th Avenue Northwest described as a mixed-use development featuring single-family housing, townhomes and apartments among retail shops, restaurants, bars, offices and a hotel.

The city will also consider two multi-family residential structures on Boyd Street and a 75-unit affordable housing space at the northeast corner of Imhoff Road and Oakhurst Avenue.

The city has received a number of building permits this year for multi-family residential apartments including one on McCullough Street, Dean's Row Avenue, Monnett Avenue and two on Boyd Street. Applications for multi-family apartment buildings on College Avenue and Symmes Street were also submitted.

OU's move to the SEC makes financial sense, Martin said. He said the move would pay off long-term, despite the estimated increase in rent.

"It's the national trend, but then a little bit more zeroing in on the fact that we're going to (join the) SEC and what that means," Martin said.



PHOTO PROVIDED

OU Graduate Student Senate Chair Claire Burch, Undergraduate Student Congress Vice Chair Amelia Landry, Campus Activities Council Chair Katie Tramel and SGA President Christopher Firch attend the SEC Exchange meeting between university student leaders in July.

AN EXCHANGE OF IDEAS

OU SGA inspired to improve campus, athletic engagement

BY TAYLOR JONES • TAYLOR.P.JONES-1@OU.EDU

Leadership from OU's Student Government Association traveled to the University of Mississippi in July to meet with their counterparts from Southeastern Conference universities ahead of OU's transition to the conference in 2024.

This meeting, called SEC Exchange, was a three-day conference giving over a hundred students in leadership the chance to discuss the ideas they have to grow, support and uplift their student bodies in the SEC.

While there, OU's student leaders shared ideas and learned how the move to the SEC will impact student life beyond athletics.

OU SGA President Christopher Firch said the main takeaways for him, which included growing partnerships with athletics and increasing student participation in SGA, showed how much student life can expect to grow in upcoming years.

"OU's definitely in a great place right now, but I think there's definitely areas and room for growth," Firch said.

Firch said he loved learning about how connected other student bodies were during

athletic events. He mentioned that some SEC schools have stronger student turnout at sporting events and more established traditions.

Texas A&M, which joined the conference in 2012, has the Midnight Yell, in which students gather at midnight before a football game and sing the school's fight song. Missouri, which moved with Texas A&M, has the Zou Crew, one of NCAA basketball's loudest student sections.

Ole Miss has the Hotty Toddy chant and its iconic tailgating scene, The Grove. Florida has its Gator Chomp and "I won't back down," and Mississippi State has its cowbells ringing throughout the stadium.

Firch said he wants traditions at OU, beyond the Sooner Schooner, to flourish and hopes to grow SGA's partnership with the OU Athletics Department to meet the standards of other SEC schools.

"We have hundreds of student athletes who are at OU and they work extremely hard," Firch said. "Imagine being a student but also honestly coming close to a full-time job being an athlete. So you know how hard they work. It's

really important that we show out and support them as well."

Firch said beyond football, he hopes to see more student turnout at other athletics such as basketball, gymnastics and softball.

Amelia Landry, vice chair of the OU Undergraduate Student Congress, said she was heartened to learn other SEC universities were nonpartisan like OU, and had good relationships with their states' legislatures.

"Because a lot of the SEC schools are flagship universities, ... whereas some of the schools in the Big 12 aren't, I think that does create a difference in the relationship with the state government," Landry said.

Firch said one of the main things OU's SGA lobbies for at the local state government level is higher education funding.

"I definitely think that's something that is a disconnect between other schools, especially from bigger states. They get adequate funding," Firch said. "Luckily, we got an increase in funding this year, but we still need to be (increasing funding) a lot further if we want to compete with a lot of similar institutions."



PHOTO PROVIDED

Christopher Firch, Amelia Landry, Katie Tramel and Claire Burch attend the SEC Exchange in July at the University of Mississippi to discuss topics beyond athletics as an SEC school.

Ellie Herndon, Mississippi State University's Student Association president, said a lot of her university's decisions are made by the state institutions of higher learning board and she attends its meetings as a way to be involved in statewide decisions that affect the university's student body.

While the school doesn't have a student on the board, Herndon said the values, opinions and feedback from MSU's Student Association are considered by the board and can influence decisions.

Firch said one of the ways he sees students in the SEC impacting decisions made about their campuses is by having a student on their respective Boards of Regents or the state's equivalent.

"Some of the biggest decisions that are happening at OU are dependent on the Board of Regents," Firch said. "Having a student be in these conversations ... and providing more transparency for students and also having students get a voice at the table when a lot of these things are impacting students specifically is, I think, extremely important, imperative, and it's something we've been trying to do for a while."

In January 2022, when Phil Albert resigned from the OU Board of Regents, Crispin South, OU's SGA chair at the time, along with other students and faculty, advocated for the appointment of a student regent to complete the remainder of Albert's term.

In Louisiana, there is a student on the Board of Regents who represents the Council

of Student Body Presidents from across the state's universities, which includes SEC school Louisiana State University. The council promotes communication among the students and member schools of LSU, Southern University, University of Louisiana and Louisiana Community & Technical College, according to its website.

Mississippi State, Firch said, had an idea that provided students with a resource for cheaper textbooks.

Herndon said the MSU Student Association has a partnership with the university's Barnes & Noble. Each student is automatically opted into the program and pays \$20 per credit hour for their textbooks, which can sometimes significantly decrease the price of textbooks. Students can also opt out of the program if they want to buy textbooks independently.

Firch said this inspired OU's SGA to look into a collaboration with Top Hat, a platform for education software. Firch said SGA is in conversations with the provost's office and Top Hat to make this a reality for students.

"I've learned sometimes change takes time," Firch said. "I think patience is a big thing I've been learning."

Firch said the exchange also showed him how some SEC schools see stronger voter turnout for student government elections than OU does. Auburn University, for instance, had a 34% voter turnout for their elections, according to Auburn's SGA President John David Jones. Firch said OU typically has a 10% to 15% voter turnout.

Jones told OU Daily that one of the ways SGA at Auburn achieves its high voter turnout is by being as interactive throughout the year as possible.

"We try to be in high-traffic areas across campus and we have a strong social media presence," Jones said. "I think the biggest thing is we really do try to connect with the students throughout the year. Whenever voting rolls around, we really try to make the effort (to demonstrate) that we don't show up for a week to get elected and then, after that, we kind of disappear. That's a huge goal for us every year."

As president, Firch said he wants the future generation of SGA leadership to be chosen and trained as someone mindful of their role in representing the student body.

"One thing is as (SGA) president, you just sit in a lot of rooms where you're the only student in there, and it's important that when these decisions are being made ... you're just making sure that you have students' best interest in mind regarding what they want and the experience that they want to have," Firch said.

While Firch and Landry said OU learned from their future SEC counterparts, Jones said the exchange offered a learning opportunity for all schools. The addition of OU and Texas, he said, only created room for expansion.

"It was really unique because a lot of these SEC schools have been meeting for years and so there's some ideas that we have just accepted that every school does this, this is just status quo," Jones said.

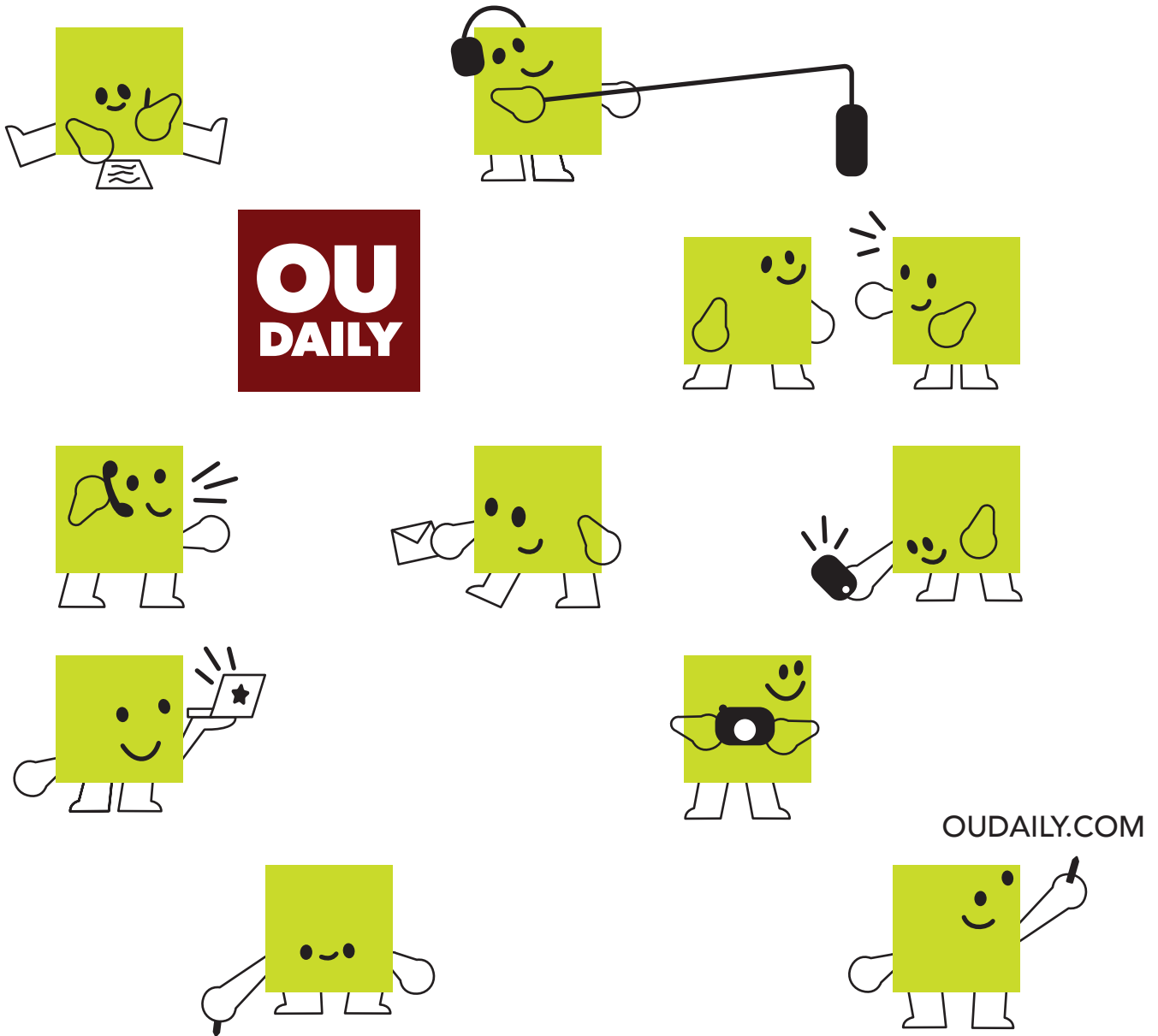
Jones said OU and Texas provided a fresh perspective on the ways student leadership can impact and enrich students' lives.

Landry said as OU transitions into the SEC, she sees the university population growing, thus increasing the opportunities for growth in student life.

She sees this transition as bringing about the necessity for SGA to find more ways to connect students with communities on campus, to fund more registered student organizations and to make campus a safe and comfortable environment.

As the transition increases opportunities in student life, Firch hopes the connection with other universities will help him and future OU SGA leadership in navigating future challenges.

"If I have an issue or problem or challenge, instead of having no one to talk to, I have a line of network, whether it's from Georgia or Mississippi State or (University of Texas at) Austin, that I can call and see how they do things differently and what similarities we have," Firch said. "It helps me and gives a good way to have a new perspective on things and makes our SGA more innovative and more accessible to students."



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how to navigate PEER PRESSURE

Peer pressure doesn't have to be negative. Social influence can also help guide you toward healthy behavior through positive peer pressure.

negative peer pressure

bullies and belittles you
having to do something to be accepted
encourages unsafe sex and substance misuse
often involved in dangerous or damaging activities
friends start acting aggressive when you refuse

positive peer pressure

shared values
community involvement
influences healthy and happy experiences
engages in other activities besides drinking
defends others or calls out harmful behavior

Positive peer groups

Social connectedness helps us feel less lonely.

However, trying to fit in with alcohol isn't a long-term solution to feel connection.

1/2 of OU students felt lonely and socially isolated

In addition to self-regulating protective factors, investing in positive social contexts and events can reduce alcohol-related consequences:

hosts that comply with drinking laws and place drink limits

events that offer meals and water

close friends that encourage safe drinking

peer groups that volunteer regularly

Giving into pressure

"i just want to fit in"

"i'm expected to drink"

"i just want to be liked"

"experimentation is just a part of going to college"

"i need to de-stress from work and school"

Often times, students may go against their own judgement and self-control just to fit in and impress others. Additionally, perceptions of drinking culture in media perpetuates views on alcohol use on campus.

these factors combined with stress may increase the risk of binge drinking for students



Turning down peer pressure

Saying 'no' to alcohol can help you feel more confident in showing self-control and agency. If you need to, you can suggest a new setting:



coffeehouse



movie theater



fitness center



your house

Saying 'no' should be enough for any situation. If you find yourself being mocked or pestered to drink, enlist friends for support and empowerment. You can also leave at any time you're uncomfortable.





RACHEL NICHOLS/OU DAILY

A view of Main Street, sometimes referred to as Historic Downtown Norman, at dusk. The stretch of road hosts 2nd Friday Norman Art Walk every month and Norman Music Festival every April.

DOWNTOWN'S EVOLUTION

Businesses take on new challenges and opportunities

BY PEGGY DODD • PDODD@OU.EDU

Main Street Norman is marked by its mural of a red tail hawk that watches over the district, the lights that swing between buildings and the local businesses that line the streets.

On the second Friday of every month, the sidewalks are full of local artists and people wandering from store to store. In April, stages take the place of cars as Normanites gather for the annual Norman Music Festival.

Those live events aren't all of downtown Norman's story. The area is sometimes referred to as Historic Downtown Norman, as the district is home to the city's original retail and entertainment spaces. Businesses have come and gone for years, including over this past summer.

But after OU announced its intent to move to the SEC, and then later announced an earlier transition to happen in 2024, downtown and

the entirety of Norman faced new challenges: How prepared should businesses be and how do they achieve that?

Gabriel Bird has owned and operated his dentistry on Main Street since April 2019 and doesn't regret making the move to downtown at all, saying it's a wonderful place, where his office is.

"Downtown tends to attract more people who live in Norman, people that are here and don't necessarily want to go where all the college kids are," Bird said.

Nancy Coggins, director of development and public relations at Sooner Theatre, also said she adores the downtown area. Sooner Theatre is one of the state's original theaters and is still in operation today. Coggins called the street vibrant, noting its importance to the city.

"For our community, I think it's a really vital place and I love it," Coggins said. "I love our downtown, I think it's amazing."

In Coggins' 12 years on Main Street, she's seen the district attract more visitors and watched several businesses come and go. This summer, downtown Norman lost Michelangelo's Coffee and Wine Bar and The Meating Place. But those buildings won't stay empty for long, according to Coggins.

"We're not seeing businesses abandoned downtown," Coggins said. "We are seeing turnover in some businesses, but people aren't fleeing downtown."

Brent Jordan and his family owned Michelangelo's for five years until they decided it was time to move on from downtown, choosing to donate the assets to charity.

Jordan said despite the decision to make



RACHEL NICHOLS/OU DAILY

Evening on Main Street, where a former business known as The Meating Place is now home to InkFire Ramen Tapas & Bar.



RACHEL NICHOLS/OU DAILY

Former Main Street business, Michelangelo's Coffee and Wine Bar, closed after 5 years. The location is now undergoing renovations.

a charitable donation, they had interested buyers. He didn't disclose to which charity he donated his business. Jordan said he was touched by the support from the community, but knows his decision allows for new growth for his family.

"My family and I had decided that we were ready to move onto a different chapter in our lives," Jordan said. "It was sad for us and the end of an era in some ways, but I think that allows for new growth and new beginnings and new opportunities."

Jordan said rents are on the rise on Main Street; however, he said it didn't contribute to him closing Michelangelo's doors. The foot traffic downtown, with events like Norman Music Festival and 2nd Friday Norman Art Walk, can overcome rent adjustments, leaving renters to pay for the benefit of the location, Jordan said.

Jordan said rent will always be a challenge in business, along with increasing insurance rates.

"We were at a place where we were going to either want to or need to invest more or change course, and that's where we decided we wanted to change," Jordan said.

Scott Martin, president and CEO of the

Norman Chamber of Commerce, said he always hates to see businesses go, but pointed to new opportunities heading to Main Street. Beanstalk Coffee and Sno, a popular chain in Norman, will take over Jordan's former establishment, Inkfire Ramen Tapas & Bar will take The Meating Place's spot and a new sports bar and grill named Rooster's opened recently next to The Winston. The Brewhouse was formerly in Rooster's location, which closed this year.

As with most things in business, being downtown provides different benefits and challenges. Some concerns Bird, Coggins, Martin and Jordan expressed include parking, safety and the ongoing citywide conversation about people experiencing homelessness.

"There's some challenges around homelessness. That's not different than any other community. It's kind of all over the country right now," Martin said. "We need to be compassionate, we need to be thoughtful and find sensible solutions, ... but be mindful of the businesses, their employees and the customers they're dealing with and how that impacts them too."

The current city housing shelter, called A Friend's House, is located at 109 W. Gray St.,

one block north of Main Street. The Norman City Council had previously considered moving the shelter to 718 N. Porter Ave. However, the rezoning proposal was denied by the planning commission and city council recently sold the land to the Board of Cleveland County Commissioners.

With the growth of Main Street and the continuing development in the area, the city of Norman is faced with preparing for the move to the SEC and the inevitable increase in traffic and opportunities for growth.

Last fall, Martin and other city leaders visited communities in the SEC and paid attention to what other downtown areas looked like. Martin said all the communities focused on drawing visitors in with live music and entertainment.

Martin said businesses are excited about the move, however, there are concerns about preparedness despite Martin's plans.

Martin said he believes small improvements could easily be made on Main Street, such as placing OU and city-branded banners on the light poles to better demonstrate partnerships. One block north of Main Street is Gray Street, which is set to become a two-way road later this year.



OLIVIA LAUTER/OU DAILY

The Sooner Theatre offers more than 55 year-round classes for ages 3 to 18.

Martin said the two-way road would slow down traffic and make the street more walkable and businesses more observable. Martin said the same logic could be applied to Main Street in the future.

Other improvements could also come in the shape of projects like the James Garner Avenue extension plan, a voter-approved project extending the street north to Flood Avenue, Martin said. He believes this will offer a new entry into Norman from Oklahoma City as Flood Avenue is an exit off I-35 and connects to Robinson Street.

To improve long-range development, Martin suggested adding more live venues, shops and restaurants along with the implementation of a business improvement district and beautification efforts. Martin also pointed to projects around downtown that could benefit Main Street, like the current enhancement project on Porter Avenue, county fairground improvements and developing the land to the east left by Griffin Memorial Hospital's move.

After the September announcement of a proposed \$1 billion entertainment district in University North Park, neither Bird, Coggins or Martin are concerned the new district could take away from the downtown area. Instead, it could bring significant benefits.

If the entertainment district is approved, its representation on city council would fall to Ward 8 Councilmember Matthew Peacock.

Peacock wrote to OU Daily that he doesn't

feel the district is an "either/or" proposal, meaning he doesn't think success there would come at a sacrifice to other parts of Norman.

Peacock wrote that in the city's broader discussion of exploring overlay districts, other areas of town could be companion items to the entertainment district beyond downtown, like the Lindsey Street corridor from east to west, the land in east Norman where Griffin Memorial Hospital currently resides and Ed Noble Parkway on the west side of town.

"If done strategically and with intent, then Norman can replicate that model in all areas of the city, lifting up all areas," Peacock wrote. "Positive benefit in one area should yield positive benefit in adjacent areas in a self-feeding system."

Peacock explained that defining specific districts in Norman, similar to Oklahoma City's model, was a priority of his at the annual summer city council retreat, something he said he's been attempting to solidify for years.

Peacock wrote that he wants specific zoning overlays to be placed over proposed districts, allowing them to retain and enhance the characteristics that make them unique.

Peacock believes placing business improvement districts — partnerships driven by property owners where businesses pay a specific tax to the city for maintenance, development and promotional purposes for the district — in those areas would provide a district with the budget and staff to market business

and organize events.

Ward 4 Councilmember Helen Grant, who represents downtown Norman, told OU Daily that they believe business improvement districts are premature, but should happen across the city in preparation for the SEC move. A business improvement district proposal was presented for downtown Norman before, but ultimately failed in 2022. Grant said another proposal is needed.

Beyond business improvement districts in Norman, Grant hopes the move to the SEC inspires more establishments to be safe spaces for the 2SLGBTQ+ community.

"I want a vibrant patchwork," Grant said. "I want a place for young families that gets them in the area and walking around. I want to see diversity and inclusion."

Despite rent and insurance increases, a new entertainment district to the north and expanded business plans across the city, Main Street will remain a constant anchor in the community, as described by Coggins.

In his over 30 years in Norman, Martin has watched Main Street morph and change as new opportunities arise. While he believes Main Street could be improved, he's also seen it far from the bustling hub for the arts it is today.

"I've seen downtown when it's really been challenged and not very vibrant, and right now is not one of those times," Martin said.

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5-4 Bed	5-5 Bed	2-4 Bed	4-5 Bed	1 Bed	2-6 Bed
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OLIVIA LAUTER/OU DAILY

Senior Mandi Kanhema sits in Farzaneh Hall. Kanhema is the president of OU's International Advisory Committee.

WORK, TRANSPORT, FOOD

OU international students face hidden barriers, lack resources

BY ANUSHA FATHEPURE • ANUSHA.FATHEPURE@OU.EDU

Crossing the South Oval, Mandi Kanhema lugged a plastic tub of decorations and materials the International Advisory Committee will use to host events during the school year.

Since she doesn't have a car, Kanhema rushed to get from the Oklahoma Memorial Union to her job at the Honors College as a student assistant on time. She works 20 hours per week between two jobs to make ends meet while studying as a pre-medical student.

These are only a few of the responsibilities Kanhema juggles while facing obstacles as an international student on campus.

Kanhema, a student from Zimbabwe and president of OU's International Advisory Committee, said struggles such as not having a car are common for members of the international student community. Limited work

hours and resources are additional challenges for the community while studying at OU.

"It all boils down to how resources are provided to you," Kanhema said.

Emelie Schultz, vice president of the OU Student Government Association, said international students' struggles are complex.

Schultz, who is from Sweden, said that international students are unaware of many things that can be common knowledge for American students.

"There are so many levels that you have to go through to just make it to the basic level. You need legal advice because you could compromise your F-1 visa. You need to build a good credit score. ... Not every career or college decision is just an application. There is always a process that many international students don't

know about," Schultz said.

At OU, international students who are enrolled full-time and in valid F-1 status can work for a maximum of 20 hours per week while classes are in session. To avoid violating their visas, they are limited to on-campus jobs, meaning they can earn between \$7.25 to \$10 per hour. If students work off-campus jobs, they must count toward degree requirements.

Kanhema said most international students are eager and willing to work, but these limitations restrict opportunities.

"It's that aspect of trying to navigate your life here and trying to make ends meet when you don't have the capacity to do that," Kanhema said.

Schultz said the financial strain could be exacerbated in situations where international



BOB NGUYEN/OU DAILY

Emelie Schultz is an international student from Sweden. Schultz is the vice president of the OU Student Government Association.

students need to send money to their families on top of covering their own expenses.

Schultz and Kanhema said the limitation on work hours and wages can create obstacles for international students that affect other parts of their lives.

International students often don't have driver's licenses or access to a vehicle. Schultz said there can be safety issues for students who need to rely on others, sometimes even strangers, for rides.

Schultz emphasized the importance of protecting international students from unsafe situations. She said students can use rideshare services, like Uber, Lyft or Norman's public transportation system, but these services often include high prices, unreliable timing and potentially dangerous circumstances.

Schultz said she was excited this year about OU SafeRide's partnership with Norman On-Demand, a pilot microtransit program for late night and Sunday service in core Norman. The program extends available transportation options and is accessible to all residents of Norman, including OU students. The first six trips are free and will be \$2 after. Schultz said this partnership could potentially be a cost-friendly transportation solution for students.

Kanhema said she was offered an

internship at the American Heart Association in Oklahoma City last summer.

It was an opportunity she could not refuse, but public transit was not a reliable way of getting to work. Kanhema spent approximately \$100 per day, five days a week for 10 weeks, to travel back and forth between Norman and her internship.

Kanhema said working at the lab helped build her resume and learn as a scientist, but it took a toll on her.

"You are having to journey back and forth, but it's such a great opportunity to build yourself as a person," Kanhema said. "It's one of those (situations) where I know a lot of international students have passed on a lot of opportunities because of the transportation aspect."

Kanhema said these difficulties are not limited to summer internships. As a pre-med student, she has struggled with transportation to get volunteer and clinical hours; most medical schools expect at least 100 hours of volunteer and clinical hours each.

"You're making yourself vulnerable to just reaching the basic level of being a successful student," Kanhema said.

Karen Molina Castro, student programs coordinator at International Student Services and former international student from El Salvador, said even if international students

want to get their driver's licenses, they run into a number of difficulties.

Students have to ask a friend to dedicate time and their own vehicle to teach them how to drive. Alternatively, students can attend a driving school, but those can range from approximately \$300 to \$800, money many cannot spare.

Castro said that even if international students manage to get driver's licenses, cars can be an expensive investment, especially if students are not sure if they are staying in the country post graduation. Castro said that when she was a student, some friend groups pooled money to buy a car to share.

Schultz and Kanhema said that asking someone for a ride can be a very vulnerable experience, even if they know their friends are willing to volunteer.

"It's about the whole integration of international students in the American student society because it creates a barrier," Schultz said. "If you tell your American friend, they always say, 'God, just tell me. I can drive you everywhere.' But then, when you do, you become a strain?"

"You become dependent on your friend; ... that enhances the gap between international and American student groups."

Without transportation and reduced funds because of work limitations, international

students can often face food insecurity.

"It's really very important to highlight that because I think a lot of people have been like, 'Okay, I'm really hungry,' or, 'I didn't make it to dinner, and I don't have anything at home. I'm just not going to eat.' That becomes a big issue," Schultz said.

Kanhema and Schultz described experiences of using water in oats after their milk had spoiled because they didn't have a car to drive to the grocery store.

"It easily (becomes) secondary. Not because food is not important, everyone knows food is important, but it's your classes, your clubs... all the other things that are going on for international students," Schultz said. "Buying milk is just not the first thing that you prioritize."

Being far from home can be difficult for students, especially if their families are facing difficulties abroad.

Engineering junior Ziyad Asli is from Marrakech, a city in Morocco that was recently hit by the deadliest earthquake in the area since 1960 with a reported magnitude of 6.8.

Asli's family safely escaped the damage, but when he first found out about the earthquake, Asli said he struggled to get in contact with his family because of network connection failures. He spent a day calling friends, frantically trying to get more information.

"During that instant of time when I was trying to find my family, I felt like I would have no one else in my life," Asli said. "I felt very alone for a short period of time."

Asli said that, in these times, it's important for everyone in the OU community to come together and support those impacted abroad and in Morocco. He said awareness and acknowledgment are the first steps in supporting your international friends.

Kanhema said the combination of work limitations, financial stress, homesickness and food insecurity can deeply impact international students' mental health.

"I know a lot of students that start off with such a great level of academics, but they just trickle down because of these things," Kanhema said. "These factors compound because of the helplessness that is associated with not even being able to help yourself"

Schultz said because of the unique difficulties international students face, they can feel isolated from the rest of the university. The lack of transportation can prohibit students from attending social events occurring off campus which can make students feel even less connected to their peers.

"If you stay in your American bubble, and you don't have an international friend, you won't understand their lives, and they won't understand yours," Schultz said.



OLIVIA LAUTER/OU DAILY

Mandi Kanhema, a senior from Zimbabwe, discusses transportation challenges as an international student.

RESOURCES

OU Food Pantry

- Free supplemental food assistance, clothing, books and other resources.
- Check website for hours and instructions on placing an order.

International Student Lounge in Farzaneh Hall

- Offers resources, information and support for international students.
- Offers varied meals and snacks throughout the year.
- Check @ouinternational on Instagram for more details.

Friends to International Students

- Program to connect international students with host families and students who can help with the adjustment to American culture.
- Check the OU International Student Services website for more details.

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Hannah Allam | The Washington Post

*National security reporter
focusing on extremism and domestic terrorism*

"Student Media laid the foundation for my entire journalistic career: I learned the skills I would need on the job, got hands-on training at the paper, practiced community engagement as an editor and graduated feeling incredibly lucky to have had professors who showed me how to turn a passion into a profession."



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