

## Paul Strasbaugh

*By Roy H. Williams, CCE*

### PIONEER OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN POST-WAR AMERICA

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born in 1919, Paul Strasbaugh was raised amid the noise of industry in New Freedom, PA, where his father worked as a foreman in one of the nation's first plastics factories. His early exposure to the benefits manufacturing jobs could bring to a community and to the families employed there influenced his future in profound ways.

After graduating from Dickson College, he joined many others in his generation to fight in WWII, during which he participated in the Battle of the Bulge in Europe in the winter of 1944. Finishing his US Army career at Camp Chafee in Arkansas near the Oklahoma border, he applied for a job nearby at the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce.

Strasbaugh was hired and in 1946 became part of a new generation of economic developers. Their mission to rebuild cities and provide opportunities for millions of returning soldiers was vital to both the local and national economy. In Oklahoma City, he also was met with ever greater opportunity, as the young city wasn't even 60 years old and the pioneering spirit that brought settlers to the area was still strong in the business and community leadership. They were determined to create one of America's greatest cities.

## STRASBAUGH AS BUSINESS RECRUITER

Strasbaugh wasted no time in making an impact on this growing community. His first project was helping to locate O'Brien Paint Co. to the city.

Buoyed by his success, he then began working on what would become one of his legacy projects. Collaborating with Oklahoma United States Senators Robert S. Kerr and Mike Monroney, the three landed a large Federal Aviation Administration center for the city's airport, now the Mike Monroney Aeronautical Center. The Center is the largest facility of the Department of Transportation outside of

the Washington, DC area and remains as a mainstay of the area's economy, employing 7500 people in direct and contract positions.

Long time Chamber leader Stanley Draper, a legend in Chamber management, was quick to recognize talent and soon promoted Strasbaugh to lead the Chamber's Industrial and Oil & Gas Divisions. He later went on to serve as its general manager and then succeed Draper as executive vice president and CEO of the Chamber.

Strasbaugh had a hand in business recruiting during his entire 36-year career at the Chamber, leading one of the most effective economic development programs in the nation during this period. His fingerprints can be seen on projects that brought more than 100,000 jobs to the area from a list that includes some of our nation's best known and most respected companies, including Western Electric, Honeywell, Firestone, Xerox, Hertz Corporation, York Corporation, and General Motors.

## STRASBAUGH AS URBAN PIONEER

Strasbaugh's work was not limited to industrial recruitment. Faced with a flight of businesses and families to suburbia and a deteriorating downtown infrastructure, Strasbaugh turned his attention to



*Paul Strasbaugh makes a presentation to General Bryce Poe, former commander of the Air Force Logistics Command.*

Roy Williams is President and CEO of the Greater Oklahoma City Chamber. (rwilliams@okcchamber.com)

## PIONEER OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN POST-WAR AMERICA

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steering the city's redevelopment efforts. He was distraught by the deterioration of the once vibrant downtown that attracted him to the area. His focus and determination to re-make the city's core made him an early leader of urban economic development and an unabashed champion of downtowns. In 1967, he was quoted in a U.S. News and World Report article about economic development saying "It takes jobs to build a city. The base for these jobs is industrial development, and that requires a strong central city. The massive support services of transportation, water supply, sewage disposal, education and cultural activities all have to be provided for by the central city. If you don't have these elements in place, you cannot attract industry."



*Paul Strasbaugh joined the Chamber in 1946 after returning from World War II.*

He was instrumental in forming the city's urban renewal authority and the development of a new plan for the downtown created by renowned architect I.M. Pei. He set out to implement the "Pei Plan" through a combination of public and private investment. He was instrumental in securing \$35 million in federal funding for Oklahoma City's program. He then went on to secure matching private sector pledges and city council support that resulted in the construction of three public parking garages, three office towers, and the city's Myriad Gardens.

Strasbaugh then turned his attention to redeveloping the city's visitor industry. Forty years prior, the city's central location made it a common stop for the nation's conventioners with only New York and Chicago drawing more visitors. He wanted to bring back this lucrative industry and led a campaign for a public vote to fund a new convention center (1972) and to pass a hotel/motel tax plan for expanding visitor marketing and attraction.

Another visitor project, this time an attraction, was a favorite project of Strasbaugh – the National Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City. He had a real love for western art and revered the history of the West. He played a leading role in the location and construction of the museum and when some wanted to relocate it to another state, he led an effort that ensured its retention atop Persimmon Hill on the city's northeast side. The museum has since expanded and is now known as the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum. The museum also hosted Strasbaugh's memorial service on his passing in 2009.

### STRASBAUGH AS DEVELOPER

Strasbaugh "retired" from the Chamber in 1982 to become general manager of Oklahoma Industries Authority (OIA) and the Oklahoma City Industrial and Cultural

Facilities Trust, positions he held until the end of his life. He helped create OIA and its forerunner organization Oklahoma Industries, Inc., which was started following World War II to create industrial parks. Development corporations and industrial parks were both novel ideas in the mid 1940s.

OIAs and the trust's work initially involved the acquisition of properties; construction or expansion of suitable facilities; and leasing facilities, capital equipment and other improvements to responsible firms and organizations.

The original projects included a 90-acre development just northeast of downtown – which attracted local pioneering manufacturer Macklanburg-Duncan; followed by two additional parks that brought Western Electric and Honeywell.

This new era of development and public private partnerships was soon expanded beyond industrial projects to include development of medical, educational and cultural facilities.

Beyond the hundreds of businesses impacted by the work, these efforts also financed the construction of sprawling health care complexes, cultural enrichment projects at the National Cowboy Hall of Fame and the Amateur Softball Hall of Fame and Stadium (home to the Women's College World Series since 1990), and major expansions of Oklahoma City University and the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center campus.

When tragedy struck Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995 with the terrorist bombing of the Murrah Federal Building, Paul led the Oklahoma City Industrial and Cultural Facilities Trust in the acquisition, preservation and redevelopment of the historic Journal Building, which was heavily damaged by the blast. Today the building houses the Oklahoma City National Memorial, which honors the victims, survivors, rescuers, and all who were affected by this tragic event.

Since 1945, these economic development entities have been crucial to more than 200 projects that developed more than 3,000 acres and built more than \$1.5 billion in facilities. Their impact can be seen, not just in the projects' original intent but as legacy projects that continue to generate new uses and a continuing impact over time.



*Artist rendering of the Western Electric plant in Oklahoma City, 1961.*

## PAUL STRASBAUGH

1946 - 1948	Assistant Manager, Industrial Development Division, Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce
1948 - 1962	Manager, Industrial and Oil & Gas Divisions, Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce
1962 - 1968	General Manager, Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce
1968 - 1982	Executive Vice President, Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce (comparable to President & CEO today)
1982 -2013	General Manager, Oklahoma Industries Authority, Oklahoma City Industrial and Cultural Facilities Trust

## A LEGACY PROJECT

One of Strasbaugh's most complicated and heralded projects would also grow to be one with perhaps the most important long term impacts.

He led the effort to bring a General Motors assembly plant to the community in the early 1970s. The project included the assembly of a 436-acre site located on the south side of Tinker Air Force Base and required working through a myriad of challenges, including the use of then innovative methods of compliance with the evolving Clean Air Act.

Separately, the General Motors plant would require an adjacent mile-long marshalling yard for the Santa Fe Railroad. Land was acquired by OIA and deeded to Santa Fe. Later a second marshalling yard was required to better serve the GM plant, which necessitated the closing of an arterial street. The project was announced in 1973 but just months later, the construction was halted due to an economic downturn. Undeterred, Paul pressed on and the facility was eventually constructed, with the first automobile, a Chevrolet Citation, rolling off of the assembly line in 1989.

The facility surpassed all of its economic forecasts, employing 5,000 people at its peak and producing more than five million passenger cars. The plant was shuttered by GM in 2006 as it closed eight other facilities nationwide in an effort to hold off bankruptcy.

The closure brought back to the forefront the need for Strasbaugh's knowledge and understanding of the GM site and its owner, GM, and also the mile-long Santa Fe railroad marshalling yard, now owned by BNSF. He was a close advisor in his last years as the economic development team put in motion plans to secure the GM facility for use by the U.S. Air Force.

The 3.8-million-square-foot plant presented an unprecedented opportunity for the Air Force to create a world class manufacturing facility. The plant was purchased using \$55 million in Oklahoma County bond

funds secured through a 2008 public vote and then sold to the Air Force for a dollar. The Air Force is investing up to \$100 million in the building to transform the facility and will eventually demolish 2.2 million square feet of substandard buildings.

The legacy of Paul Strasbaugh further lives on through the acquisition and conversion for use by the Department of Defense of the BNSF railroad marshalling yard that served the GM plant. Acquisition and transfer of the railyard to the Department of Defense took another seven years, but was finally accomplished in February 2015 in a complicated purchase that included the U.S. Air Force, the Oklahoma Industries Authority, City of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma County and State of Oklahoma. This new site will be home to maintenance facilities for the new KC-46A refueling tanker and has room to add two additional missions for the base. Those who completed this transaction learned their trade from the master of the art and science of economic development, Paul Strasbaugh.

## WORKING TO MAKE OKLAHOMA CITY A BETTER PLACE TO LIVE AND WORK

Paul Strasbaugh spent 63 years of his life working to make Oklahoma City a better place to live and work and the continued growth and redevelopment today is possible due to both the physical infrastructure he helped to attract or build and the cooperative support structure that is the community's foundation of economic development success. The cooperative partnerships and the culture of the public and private sectors working together to solve the community's problems – and take advantage of its opportunities – is in no small part due to the work of Paul Strasbaugh and the tools he helped to create.

"Paul was singularly focused on making a difference in this city," explained Roy Williams, current CEO and president of the Greater Oklahoma City Chamber. "To have worked for one organization that long, execute at the level he was able and then to see the phenomenal changes that have taken place is rare and probably won't

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Perhaps one of Strasbaugh's greatest assets was his humility. He frequently would quote Harry Truman to say "that it is amazing what you can accomplish when you don't care who gets the credit." To him it was more than a saying; it was a way of life.

happen again. Residents of Oklahoma City today benefit from his work every day – when they drive on an interstate he pushed for, visit a hospital he helped to finance, park in a garage downtown, visit a museum or the convention center or countless other ways."

Perhaps one of Strasbaugh's greatest assets was his humility. He frequently would quote Harry Truman to say "that it is amazing what you can accomplish when you don't care who gets the credit." To him it was more than a saying; it was a way of life. Credit for Strasbaugh was seeing the dramatic development and redevelopment of Oklahoma City in his lifetime. His only regret was not living long enough to see the completion of Devon Energy's 50-story tower underway in downtown – a building greater than even he had ever imagined for the city he worked so hard to build.

Near the end of his life, in 2008, Strasbaugh was honored with a lifetime achievement award from IEDC. In his acceptance speech, he reminisced about the greats of the industry that he had worked with and known and reiterated the importance of the role of the economic developer. Strasbaugh said, "The one thing that will not change is the role you and your organization play in the economic development of your city, state and region. You are the planners and implementers essential for the future of this great nation." 🌐



Paul Strasbaugh meets with Oklahoma City Mayor Ron Norick in 2013.

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