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Alumnus manages Texas capital city

By **Rebecca Wyatt Thomas**, OU Web Writer

Austin, the capital of Texas, is 300-square miles with nearly a million residents, 12,000 employees, 40 subsidiaries, a \$2.25 billion budget and one Oakland University alumnus overseeing all of it. Mark Ott, SBA '79 and MPA '81, was recently named the first African-American city manager of Austin. A native of Pontiac and West Bloomfield, Ott got his start in public service during his master's program at Oakland University and doesn't intend to stop helping others anytime soon.

"I didn't realize I was going to end up in this profession. My goal was to go to law school," Ott said. "I did an internship with the city administration in Southfield and that's when I realized there was a professional called city manager and that I liked the work. I liked what city managers and city administrators did and I seemed to have a knack for it. It seemed really important in a fundamental way to me."

When Ott completed graduate school, he didn't have a job so he volunteered in the city administration office and worked for free, gaining invaluable experience in the process. Shortly thereafter, he got in to his first job with the Michigan Municipal League, working in research and communication.

Ott moved on to Jackson, where he served as administrative assistant to the city manager and acting city manager when the manager was absent. He worked in the town of 39,000 for two years before being recruited to serve as the administrative services officer for Grand Rapids. After nearly six years, he was hired as the assistant city manager for Kalamazoo and then was promoted to deputy city manager. After the city manager of Kalamazoo left for Texas, Ott was appointed city manager.

After service in Kalamazoo, Ott took a year off from managing cities and traveled and studied for his law school exams. In 1998, he came to Rochester Hills and worked in the mayor's office, where he stayed for almost five years before heading for Texas.

Ott relocated to Fort Worth, Texas where he served as assistant city manager for more than five years before being recruited to serve as city manager in Austin, a position he took on Feb. 18, 2008.

City manager candidates are nationally recruited. The candidates are narrowed down and presented to the legislative body, where it will be narrowed down even more. There are often a series of interviews. Ott said there were seven others being considered for the city manager position in Austin.

"This is something I think is fundamentally important. I get pleasure out of it—being a public servant and doing things that hopefully not only sustain a quality of life for people that live in the city or community, but if you are doing the job right, you often find ways to improve it. Is it easy work? No. But it's rewarding," Ott said.

Aside from serving the citizens of the community, he has a number of "bosses" that he has to answer to, including the mayor and city council members.

"We try to provide leadership to the legislative body to assist them in their policy discussions, including the work we do and the services we provide. You can really think of a city as a very large parent corporation with a lot of subsidiaries," Ott said.

In addition, Ott said every city faces all kinds of obstacles.

"As wonderful as Austin is in terms of the quality of life and the rate of growth, it also presents all types of challenges such as how to manage the growth in a sustainable way. How do you sustain a quality environment, air quality, natural amenities, rivers, lakes, trees, trails? How do you do it in such a way that you are otherwise providing the proper physical infrastructure and adding to it as you need to," Ott said.

Looking toward the future, Ott plans to continue managing Austin and serving others.

"I will probably always be connected to public service in some way," Ott said.



Mark Ott

SUMMARY

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