

Oral History Collection

Councilman Kevin Roden

Interviewer: Leonya Harrison

Date: Oct. 29<sup>th</sup>, 2015

Place of Interview: Denton, Texas

Ms. Harrison: Leonya Harrison, interviewing Kevin Roden on Oct. 29<sup>th</sup>, 2015, about his experience with fracking in Denton Texas.

Ms. Harrison: When did you first hear about fracking?

Mr. Roden: The idea of oil and gas development was pretty pervasive for anyone living in Texas. You see it. You don't necessarily understand the process. Ah, but I think it was when the wells went in across the street from McKenna Park, on, on, across Scripture and Bonnie Brae that really activated the whole city. That was before I was on council, but at the time I was writing for a blog in town that I created called *Think Denton* so we covered that whole process extensively. And I spent

some time acquainting myself with that issue.

Harrison: When did you first become aware of the fracking debate in Denton?

Roden: You heard the concerns from the neighborhood and I think for the first time--I think Texans are generally comfortable with the idea of oil and gas development. And like I said, they see it on the horizon, you see it when you are driving out in the country. But to the extent that all of a sudden it comes up besides parks, besides neighborhoods, besides hospitals, schools, I think that was the first time Texans started saying, "Perhaps this is fine in a another context, but now that it's here, I'm going to look into it a bit more. I want to know what's coming in my neighborhood." So, you know, I think for any of us, that was the first time we started looking into this particular process.

Harrison: Was the fracking debate divisive among you and your colleagues?

Roden: Well, I mean this has been, since I've been on Council, clearly the most polarizing issue that we've seen in Denton. There's always polarizing issues. Any time you have a development project

come into a neighborhood people get angry about it. But yeah, it's because the state of the nature of political discourse in our culture, which is unfortunate, is we tend to get reared, as we think about politics, by watching what's on the national stage. Well, when you watch that, there's enemies, there's good, there's bad, there's black, there's white, there's suspicion, there's conspiracy theories, all these things. So when we first start getting engaged in local politics, which most people don't do, by the way, about 5% of registered voters vote in a city election. But what people first start doing, they draw from what they know, which is Federal politics. So they import all the way of acting and thinking and speaking to one another that we learn from watching MSNBC, CNN, FOX News into the local level, and it becomes very toxic, very quickly.

Harrison: What influenced your decision to vote for the ban on fracking?

Roden: Well, I mean that's a long and winding road. When I came into office in 2011, it was one of the issues that I put forward, was that we need to get tighter regulations on this industry, that to the

extent that they are going to come into the neighborhoods or close to it, we need to have tighter controls than what we did. So one of the first things I did when I came into office, knowing that we were about to rewrite our ordinance on oil and gas development, was worked with folks like Adam Briggie, UNT, and others to say, "How can we get additional citizen expert input into this process, so that we can kind of bring all the players to the table? and really think through this in a deeper way?" So I kind of tracked--essentially, that's what grew out of that, was the Denton Drilling Awareness Group. Ultimately, it spun off into Frack-Free Denton. The whole goal up front wasn't to ban fracking, it was to say, "How do we create tougher regulations." When we passed new regulations in 2012, everyone across the board was kind of--not everyone got what they wanted, including the industry, but everyone felt pretty comfortable that we were doing something of value. It wasn't until about a year later, when a particular operator was claiming rights on existing wells, that were terrible close to homes, that everyone

started saying, "Wait, we just passed these tough ordinances. Oh, but they don't apply to these existing wells. Oh, by the way, Denton has 300+ existing wells." That means that all of those are going to, perhaps, be ambiguous as to what regulations apply to them, and we're going to have 300 more of what we're seeing here in one particular neighborhood. So, that's when I started becoming concerned that perhaps we didn't have the right tools that the state had given us. The state, obviously, wasn't willing to regulate it. So, I was very skeptical up front of the whole approach to ban fracking. I told the organizers there up front, "This is going too far." But, at the end of the day, I think in context, what was happening at the time, the state needed to get a clear message from cities saying, "Guys, you're not addressing the problem." And I think I came to this particular issue saying, "This is going to start a state-wide conversation." Well it did, at the end of the day. Strategically, anyone can argue whether that was good or bad, because now they took away rights we previously had. So, if your goal is to get us to the point of having more

regulations, the ban of fracking, arguably, backfired. Now, but who knows? This is part of a longer conversation. I think our citizens were pretty united in that, clearly, as a result of the vote. I was happy to be on that side, because I think it was an historic step. I think we understood kind of the strength of, I hate to put it in adversarial terms, but the strength of the adversary was much stronger. So, the current battle has been won by the industry and the state legislators, but I think this is a long game.

[End of interview]