**Mayor Ray Bowman (**00:00): Hello, I'm Ray Bowman. I'm the first mayor of the city of Southside in Independence County, Arkansas. We're about the middle of the county. We're just south of the White River and south of Batesville. And I have been mayor since August 11th of 2014, when we had our first election. It was the first city in Arkansas in 20 some odd years. And so we built it from scratch.

(00:26): This all came about because our neighboring city was talking about annexing our area, and nothing wrong with the neighboring city, we just didn't want to have our own way of doing things. So we had had a school since 1948 and it was named Southside, that they had the senior class asking, "What do you want to call the school?" I said, "We'll call it Southside for south side of the White River." So that's how it got a start. And then we had a water department came along in the sixties and we had our fire department in the seventies. So we've been kind of our own unrecognized city for anywhere about 70 years.

(01:09): So, when it became apparent that could change, we decided it was time to try to do something about it. So we had our public meeting and around 400 to 500 people showed up, wanted to get involved, what can we do? And the first thing we done, the neighboring city was reading the ordinance and after the second, they had the second reading at our local community college, holds about 1200 people. It was packed. It was full of Southside people that wanted to be, we wanted our lives stay the same the way it was.

(01:51): The city voted to go ahead and put on November of 2014 ballot that they were going to try to annex our area. And the way annexation works, it's the majority of the vote of the city that wants to annex the area and the people in the area. We had about 2,500 people. They had 10,000. So it could go either way.

(02:13): So, some guys got together and the committee got together. We had a committee called "Keep Southside Free from Annexation" was the name of the committee. And we decided to start a ballot, start a petition to try to incorporate our area. And the way that had to work, it had to be a percentage of 50 plus one of the registered voters in that area and affected area. We got a map drawn up, got everything, all the addresses, all the people, and people come forward and started carrying petitions. We had people that had never voted. They register to help out and they carried the petitions and they got involved. It was a chance for them to see democracy in action. It was all ages, all walks of life that got involved.

(03:05): And we had about 60% of the registered voters signed a petition. And the way Arkansas law works, there had to be a percentage of the people on the roll, but we found out a lot of people had moved out or passed away and they were still on the roll. But that still, you had to use that number. So the ones that was actually living there and registered to vote, we had about 90% assigned.

(03:33): So it was a really joint effort. And so from August till end of September, we had enough votes, enough signatures to get it presented. There was a hearing set for the local courthouse, county judge granted our incorporation on October 24th of 2014. There was an appeal from the neighboring city, but they dropped it in March. So then we had to get a steering committee and that group had to get everything except for the first election.

(04:09): And when you start out, you got to raise money. We had to raise money for lawyers, people coming from that August meeting, all the way through donating, helping out. It was really good to see the people come together. And so we got everything worked out and had our first election, August 11th of 2014.

(04:32): The way I got involved, I helped carry the petition. I'd been there all my life and going up I went to school at Southside and we had a very strong civics teacher named Ms. Ernestine Bird. And she always preached, "If you don't vote, don't complain. It is what it is. But it's your duty to be aware of what's going on, keep up with the issues and vote your conscience."

(05:01): So I wanted the city to succeed. I've never been in public office, none of us, none of the people on the committee had, but it was time to put up or shut up, so to speak. So I had been asked by several people to run and I had promised people during that petition time we would keep it as much like they had as we could. And they trusted me to do that. And so I felt like I owed it to them try to get it started like we promised.

(05:30): So we come about in 2014. And then other things you don't think about, you have to have funding, you have to have your census. Well, we didn't have a census, so we had to call the Census Bureau in Washington and send them a map and send them money and they said, "You need to send us a city check." I said, "We don't have a city check." And so we had to chip in and get that going. So a lot of firsts in this process. But our job was to try to get a nice framework for the new city, and that was to get the government to set it up.

(06:02): We've got, the city council consists of retired grocery people, hairdresser, pharmacist, physical therapist, mobile homeowner. We've had all working class people that's been living here all their life. And it's been very, my recorder is a retired surgical nurse, practical. So it's just a really good group of people.

(06:30): And we got everything going. [inaudible 00:06:36] room for our first office to get it started. And in that period of time we have, everybody is on a voluntary basis. Nobody gets paid, so we can get things up and going. And in December of 2018, we moved into a new city hall, 4,800 square foot building, where our goal was to have it paid off in five years, so there was no tax passed forward. And we have not any taxes since then since we've become a city and we're trying to do what we said we would do.

(07:05): And with our population, we had an annexation, people moved in and we have around 3,900 people right now is our current population. And we've paved a lot of roads out there and taken care of things that we promised we'd do. And so basically, we didn't want to be in a city, but if it was going to be one, we wanted it to be our city. And so if we mess it up, we are the newest city in Arkansas, as I said, we are neighbors to the oldest city in Arkansas. So that give us a nice template on what works and what doesn't work. They do a lot of good things, but you got to be sure once you start them, they go forever. So you have to be real careful what you do. And so that's my story on part of being a mayor of Southside.