

Beyond the Dais Podcast: Episode 6 – An Interview with El Paso County Administrator Bret Waters

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Scott Anderson: Thank you for tuning into Beyond the Dais, a podcast about the stories taking place in and around El Paso County, Colorado. I'm your host, Scott Anderson, and my guest today is El Paso County's Administrator, Bret Waters. How are you doing today, Bret?

Bret Waters: Good to be here. Thanks for having me, Scott.

Scott: Good. Yeah. No, thank you. I appreciate you taking the time. I know you are a busy man, so let's get right into it. Talk about your previous roles a little bit. What have you done in the past and how has that benefited your current role as county administrator?

Bret: Sure. You know, it's all kind of progressed to kind of where I am today. I - first job out of college was actually a social worker. I have an undergraduate degree in psychology, and I worked in a place called Tulare County, California, which was where I grew up. And so, I served as a social worker for a number of years, and then actually transitioned into emergency management, which was an interesting transition, and then disaster management for a number of years. And then I took the job here in the city of Colorado Springs in 2005 as emergency management director, was promoted to deputy chief of staff and had been there for a year. But all those have been valuable for me. It's given me perspective on working at a line level. I've not always been a supervisor. I think social work in particular is - I have such deep respect for those in that profession. It is a very rewarding position but also very challenging. You see some things that are very challenging to see with children and families and that was hard on me. And so, I have a great respect for those who work in human services and certainly other groups in the county and departments.

Scott: Great. And how does what you did before compare to what you're doing now? And maybe explain a little bit about what exactly the county administrator does in the first place.

Bret: Yeah, so I think at the line level, you're working in operational concerns, right? You're - if you're a social worker, you're out working with cases. If you're emergency manager, you're writing plans, you're running exercises. You know, in other departments you're hands on. I think you transition in the administrator into strategic goals for the

organization. You know, where strategically does the organization need to go in five or ten years. You're talking about a budget that's hundreds of billions of dollars. You're talking about working with elected officials and kind of guiding the organization with, also though, with the eye in mind that you can never forget about that employee that really is the service delivery for the county, right? We work in the business of serving our citizens and so as a county administrator I always kind of keep that in mind, but you're looking at strategic goals. You're looking at strategy. You're looking at managing a large organization. And the one thing I do miss is you don't, you don't get into operations, you supervise operations. You supervise the work that's happening, but you're not hands on anymore. And that has been a challenge for me, and I miss it some days, honestly.

Scott: Sure. No, I totally understand. And you know, you mentioned a lot of these high-level things, working with budgets, working with hundreds of millions of dollars. You're looking at county-wide problems that residents might encounter. What are some of your top priorities that you have for yourself as the county administrator?

Bret: Well, I think a couple things. I think one is, you know, we're in a government entity. We're local government. So, we're funded by tax dollars, right? So, our - we report to citizen. I mean we are in the business of service delivery for taxpayers in El Paso County. And so that is a priority, is to remember who we work for, and it's those who pay our salaries, which is taxpayers of El Paso County. So, that's clearly always going to be a priority for me is to remember who we work for, remember who pays the bills. I think, you know, an acute priority as we move forward is we're funded also by the economic vitality of our county, right? Mostly sales tax. And so, we need to always remember economic development and vitality in our community is important. That's always going to be a priority. Clearly, what citizens see every day are roads they drive on and parks they go to. And so those are our priorities is infrastructure, roads, bridges, the things they see every day. The quality of their experience in El Paso County as far as government services go is important. And so those are always going to be priorities. Are we taking care of our infrastructure? Are we using our funding as wise as we possibly can and addressing those issues that citizens let us know that that's a priority for them?

Scott: And so, for you, the county administrator is not an elected position, correct? It is

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Bret: Correct.

Scott: On the flip side of that, I guess you could say, your coworkers are county commissioners. Those are elected positions. How does your relationship with them work in terms of a working relationship? How do you work with the county commissioners to meet these priorities and get those things done?

Bret: Yeah, so, I report to the county commissioners. I'm appointed by five elected officials. They are my bosses. And so, we work very closely together. We have a Board of County commissioners. We conduct official business every week, every Tuesday.

They really are an exceptional group to work with. I mean they, obviously, elected by the people in their districts, but they have a real eye for serving their constituents and working to further the goals of El Paso County. We work together on a daily basis on those and they're hard working, you know, elected officials who really have the citizens in mind as they move forward. But it's a full-time plus position for them. They work very hard. Nights, weekends, attending committees, events, work groups, and then managing the business, or working with me to manage the business of El Paso County moving forward, so...

Scott: One of those things you do with those commissioners on a weekly basis is the Board of County Commissioners meetings. Can you talk to me some about why those meetings are important, especially for the public to be involved with?

Bret: Yeah, I think it's a couple things. One, it is – we have a land use meeting in particular. And so, there's land use meetings that have to be approved, new zoning, things that impact neighborhoods. We have a master plan that, with regard to the land use, and so items of that of that nature get approved. And we want, we invite, it's the people's house, we invite citizens to come in and speak about the issues and concerns they have. Could be a land use matter, could be approval of something else. We have approved all the roads we're going to pave throughout the year. We approve funding. We have a budget hearing coming up about the overall budget and how we're going to fund the county. Everything from planning to parks to public works to human services. I mean, we – all those things are approved in a public manner transparently, and we invite the public to participate. You know the good thing is - I'd say COVID was a very difficult experience for all of us. But one of the things that forced many government and companies to do is to work remotely. And so, you know, at this time they can - citizens during these meetings can participate via remote technology, they can be at home and participate. So, we're trying to open up every avenue for citizens to participate. We want input on these items and what's happening in their community.

Scott: That's great. And you know you mentioned a couple of those big things like the land use meetings. You can get into a lot of really technical, a lot of things that you need help with, and you have a County Attorney that's in those meetings as well. Tell me how important it is to be able to work side-by-side with the County Attorney, you know when you're in these meetings and dealing with these different situations.

Bret: Yeah, very - another appointed position. There are only two appointed positions in El Paso County. The County Attorney is another one, and so very important to work with him as a County Attorney. And he really keeps us apprised of legal issues that can come up and making sure we're on the right track. I would also note that we work very closely with countywide elected officials. Those are essentially their own organizations. Departments work within our budget, but are essentially elected by the people, the Sheriff, the District Attorney are a couple. Clerk and Recorder are their own organizations elected by the people who report to them, not to me, but they do work within our overall budget.

Scott: Very good. And you know, you're talking about county positions, working together, building those relationships. What is it like building relationships outside of the county? People, you know, your community partners like the city of Colorado Springs. Tell me why that's an important relationship to build as well.

Bret: It's absolutely critical that we have regional relationships. You know, partnerships, relationships are really fundamental to getting work done. A lot of the work that we do in the community are partnerships working together for a common goal. With government entities like the City of Colorado Springs or other cities and towns in the county, along with nonprofits who do important work in our community that aren't government related, right? Everything from homeless services to others, mental health services, other services that are provided that are based on a nonprofit model. Having those relationships are critical. I've been in the community since 2005, and I have really tried to emphasize the importance of relationships because, really, partnerships and work getting done is built upon those relationships.

Scott: Now, you've been in this role for about a year now?

Bret: A little over a year.

Scott: A little over a year. OK. Tell me what you think about the staff here at El Paso County. Like you said, the staff is a very large part of what we do here. Tell me what it's been like working with the staff here at El Paso County.

Bret: Present company included, Scott?

Scott: Uh, maybe not. Let's leave that part out of it.

Bret: OK. Yeah. I think you're doing great, by the way.

Scott: Thank you.

Bret: So, I think that with any large organization, particularly in our business of service delivery, employees are our most important asset. A workforce that knows that we value the work that they do, as leaders, and that they understand that we value the hard work they put in to deliver service. We understand that employees are our most important asset. So, I am exceptionally proud of El Paso County employees in the work that they do. These are the people who work and oftentimes do not get the credit, do not get praise, right? You're talking about everything from cleanup of homeless camps to filling potholes, social workers, to parks cleanup and maintenance. All the work that happens to make citizens' experience a better one, it happens with these employees. Not to mention, they don't report to me, not to mention everyone from the DA's office to the Sheriff's Office, the Assessor's office. I mean, you can go through that list, but these are employees who are not here for - to make exceptional amounts of money. They're here to serve the public, right? They're in the public service business to assist and to serve the community. And I couldn't be happier with our employees and the work that they do.

Scott: So, can you tell me, do you think it's important for El Paso County employees to go out and tell people what it's like working for the county and maybe the benefits that they receive working for the county? Why is that something that might be important?

Bret: I think the most important thing in my mind is when employees do an exceptional job, which I think they do, when they do public service right, that stands for something, right? When they when you look at a El Paso County logo on their shirt, it stands for something. It stands for hard work, it stands for transparency, it stands for reliability. And that's the reputation we want to have, and I believe we do have in our community. And so, we stand for values, for our core values, in El Paso County. And so, when we have exceptional employees that translates to citizens saying, "you know employees, El Paso County stands for something, right? El Paso County has exceptional customer service and service delivery" and those sorts of things. And so really, it's by our examples in my mind that we share our message. It's what we do that shares what we're about. We can talk a lot about what we're about, but in the end, it's about the work that we do and how we do it.

Scott: Right. So again, you mentioned before that you've been here for roughly a year. Where do you see the county five years from now, ten years from now?

Bret: Well, I think that we need to continue to be a regional leader. The - El Paso County is the largest county by population in the state of Colorado. Hard to believe. I mean, our county is a large county and with that, there's large challenges. We have opportunities where people love to live here, which is great. We'll continue to have immense growth, which is good too. We want to have economic development. It goes hand-in-hand with people living here and growing and development. We want that. But there's always challenges. We want to make sure that we address infrastructure challenges, things that are going to come up. But in five to ten years, we want to continue to be a leader. People who want to continue to live here, to raise families here, those are the things we want to continue to do in five to ten years and simply meet the needs that are surely going to come with regard to everything from driving on a good road to going to a park or getting the services that they need. So...

Scott: Now I don't see a crystal ball anywhere in your office, but I don't expect you can foresee exactly what we're going to encounter five years from now, ten years from now. I don't think anyone really could have foreseen the COVID pandemic doing what it did necessarily to the economy, not just here in El Paso County, but the nation as a whole. How do you prepare for things like that?

Bret: Yeah, I think that one is that as we look in the future, I'm very conservative with regard to our budget making sure we're being wise and how we use our budget economically. The overall outlook is very good in El Paso County, but it's been also challenging for any organization, right? In the last year or two, you've had high inflation, you've had challenges with workforce. You've had - the pandemic kind of changed the work model of work from home. There're all sorts of things that occur, but in the end,

you want to save for a rainy day. You want to make sure that you're looking, you know, for a slowdown if there's going to be one. Economically, we think we're in a good spot, but you want to make sure that you're prepared for those sorts of things. I think one of the things that prepares you for those things is - seems not related, but it's directly related - hiring great people. You want exceptional leadership in the roles in the county because those are the individuals that are going to get you through challenges that certainly are going to come in years to come, five to ten years. Hard to predict, but having gone through a number of challenges in my career, the Great Recession and having been in government when that occurred, I have a good sense of what challenges may happen in the future. You never know. But I think we're going to weather them very well.

Scott: Great. And then the last thing I wanted to ask was why is it important for the community, for El Paso County residents, to be involved in local government?

Bret: You know, I think that continues to be something we want to emphasize, and it continues to be a challenge. People are busy, right? They are, they have, they're dropping their kids off at school. They're working full time trying to make ends meet. I mean they have significant challenges, but we want to encourage citizens to know where their tax dollars are going, right? Knowing what they're paying for, being involved in volunteer committees. We have opportunities to participate in a number of areas in the county where you can shape the future of the county, right? We want their input. We want their input in our board meetings. We want their input on items that are of interest to them. And so, it's important to participate because you, the citizens, guide the future oftentimes. I mean, their input guides our strategic goals and direction. And so, we want to encourage our citizens that participate and we're doing things differently. We're going to continue to - I think the older model of town hall meeting still works, but we're also involved in social media and other things to engage citizens where they are because they communicate differently depending on your age group. Often times, Scott, maybe you're in that group that's, you know, more focused on, hey, I get my information via social media, other things. I generally don't come home and watch the 6:00 o'clock news.

Scott: Right.

Bret: That's changing, right? And so, we are looking at opportunities to go where people are and how they get their information.

Scott: So, is there anything else you'd like to add that you think would be important for listeners to know?

Bret: No, I think we've covered most everything. We're excited about the future of El Paso County. We're excited about the direction we're headed. We are excited to live in this community. I mean, what a blessing it is to be a resident of El Paso County. To live in a great place like this. And so, we're excited about our future. We're excited to continue to serve our citizens. And so, yeah, looking forward to it.

Scott: Great. Well, I really appreciate you taking the time to Bret. I know you're a busy man so, again, thank you very much.

Bret: Thanks, Scott. Appreciate the opportunity.

Scott: So, if you're interested in listening to additional episodes of Beyond the Dais, you can search for us on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, and Amazon Music. Thanks for listening and we'll see you next time.