

Beyond the Dais: Episode 31 – An Interview with El Paso County Commissioner Carrie Geitner

Note: Transcripts are generated using a combination of speech recognition software and human transcribers and may contain errors. Please check the corresponding audio before quoting in print.

Scott Anderson: Thank you for tuning in to 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 Commissioner for District 2, Carrie Geitner. How are you doing today, Carrie?

Carrie Geitner: I'm doing good. Thanks so much for having me today.

Scott: Absolutely. Thank you for being here. I appreciate it. So, before we get started, I wanted to quickly add that if listeners are interested in more stories about people doing good in and around El Paso County, or hearing from county leadership about local government priorities and how they operate, you can find additional episodes of this podcast on your podcast platform of choice. But to go ahead and get started here, Carrie, I was wondering if you could give us a little bit of your background prior to being elected County Commissioner.

Carrie: Absolutely. So, I had a pretty varied background. I started and did a lot in nonprofits, particularly around fundraising for nonprofits, and did some time as a high school teacher, actually, and then started my own business. And the most important job that I've done is being a mom.

Scott: Very nice. And what drew you to nonprofit fundraising?

Carrie: So, I actually had several experiences with a couple of nonprofits, one of them being a hospice, which is one of the places that I did work, and just seeing the impact that they have on people's lives, really hit home for me how important the work is that our nonprofit community does. And so, I had an opportunity to go and work for a hospice and really enjoyed being able to help bring in the dollars there and make sure that those services could continue to be provided to the community.

Scott: Nice. And I was wondering if you could talk about some of your responsibilities as County Commissioner, but maybe before we get there, as County Commissioner, and seeing how nonprofits work in El Paso County and your interaction with them, what is that interaction like? And now, kind of seeing maybe the broader scope of El Paso County and how it operates, how do those nonprofits benefit being a part of the region?

Carrie: Yeah. So, our nonprofit community is incredibly important here in El Paso County. And the huge benefit that I see, I'm a limited government conservative, and so I think, you know, the government provides important services to the community, but that doesn't mean that we can provide everything to the community that the community might want and need. And so, nonprofits fill a huge role in that space that is not government involvement, but is done through, you know, private donors, and able to fill a lot of those needs that may not be appropriate for government to fill but are so important, nonetheless.

Scott: And so then back to your responsibilities as a whole as a County Commissioner, what if people were to shadow you for a day? Like what could they expect to see and then what are some other things that you do, maybe on boards, or are you working with other government entities?

Carrie: Yeah, so our days are pretty busy. You know, people often ask me, you know, what it's like and how many hours it takes me. And there are many, many weeks that I'm, you know, working 60 hours. So that can be everything from getting up in the morning and fielding initial phone calls to, you know, trying to get into e-mail and make sure that I'm responding to constituents and meeting their needs. So, we have some really cool tools that have come into play recently here at the County that's really helping to make sure we are able to do that and utilizing that technology and various staff. So, there's a lot of help there as well, but as you mentioned I serve on quite a few boards, so there are a lot of meetings of various types.

Scott: Everyone's favorite thing – meetings, I'm sure.

Carrie: Absolutely. Some of those are early in the morning and then some of those stretch all the way into the evening hours. So really depends on which boards are meeting, on what those kinds of hours look like. But there are lots of other community events that we attend, everything from ribbon cuttings to, you know, just community engagement-type events. So, we try to participate in as many as of those as possible and, you know, that's obviously in addition to our regular public meetings and all the work that comes along with those. So, you know, an average day, I'm not really sure there is average. They're kind of all over the place, but I think it's fair to say lots of meetings, lots of phone calls and lots of interaction with constituents and folks in our business community, yeah.

Scott: So, you mentioned that interaction with constituents and also some tools that are used to make that happen. Citizen Connect is one of those tools that people can use to get in touch with Commissioners and also to kind of talk about a lot of things involved around El Paso County. To you, why are tools like that important for us for the county to be able to interact with the residents of the county?

Carrie: Yeah, I'm really excited to some of the new things we're doing with Citizen Connect. And I think that's really important because, you know, we're here to represent our community. We want to make sure that their needs are met. And when you have a

need that you need to have met and have the county address, it can be frustrating if you can't get to the right person or, you know, sometimes that's even residents who, you know, live in the city and they're concerned about a road. It may not even be a county-maintained road but, you know, maybe they don't know who maintains that road. It can be pretty confusing to figure out which government agencies. So, what I love about Citizen Connect is it takes that confusion for citizens out of the way. They can submit something there and, you know, even if it is something that is a city responsibility, we can connect them directly to the city and get that request over. So, it kind of takes some of the frustration and the guesswork out of finding the right person, you know, to deal with the issue that they have and that's what Citizen Connect does. Rather than trying to find an e-mail or a phone number for a specific department, they can just hop on Citizen Connect, report what it is, or connect with their Commissioner even, and make sure that they're able to get to the right person. And the added benefit is that it, you know, it tracks the progress of that for them and that's really great. So, they can get an update. There's nothing more frustrating than calling and leaving a message or, you know, sending an e-mail and a few days go by and you're not really sure what's happening with it. So, it's a great way for us to make sure that they know that we are taking their concerns seriously and working towards solving whatever it is that they're contacting us about.

Scott: Very good. And so, at the beginning of this year, you were selected by your fellow Commissioners as the Vice Chair for the board of County Commissioners. What does that mean for you? And what role does that Vice Chair play?

Carrie: So, the Vice Chair role, we get a little more involvement in the agenda-setting process and a little more heads-up on things that are coming down the pipeline though, you know, we really try to make sure that all of the Commissioners have as much information as possible. You know, the Chair and the Vice Chair are really roles that allow for us to kind of help facilitate the board, but they're, they're not really roles that are, you know, more important than the other members. We're all still equal members. It's just that we help facilitate some of that stuff. And then of course the other piece of the Vice Chair role that's important is whenever the Chair is not available, then it falls on me to run our public meetings, which I got the opportunity to do recently for the first time.

Scott: How was that?

Carrie: You know, it was pretty good. There's a lot of things to remember when you're going through that and making sure all your procedures are correct and, you know, legally that we've done everything that we need to do and so it just, you know, it's a level of attentiveness during those public meetings. Yeah. And that's actually a really cool thing to talk about.

Scott: So, when you are put into that situation, you also have the County Administrator and the County Attorney that are up there with you. How helpful is it to have them a part

of that process to help you through those type of procedural elements of those meetings?

Carrie: Yeah, that's really important. There are a lot of very prescriptive things that we want to make sure that we follow so that we're doing them correctly and we don't have any inconsistencies with our procedure and so making sure to ask, you know, when we're not sure – “do we need to take a vote on this particular thing” or “what's the order, the proper order of doing something” that comes up, especially if you know there's a land-use hearing. These are really complicated things that we need to follow specific procedures on and, in that situation, sometimes something pops up that we weren't expecting. And, you know, it's really great to have your, you know, your County Attorney there, especially to help advise on those things and make sure that we do everything right. Because, ultimately, our goal is to make sure that our meetings are fair and they're conducted in a way, you know, that make sure whatever the businesses that we're dealing with is dealt with properly.

Scott: Very good. So, you're more than halfway through your first term as County Commissioner. My how time flies. Can you talk about some of the accomplishments that you're proud of, as well as some things that you'd like to see done prior to the end of this term?

Carrie: Yeah, absolutely. I really came into this role wanting to make sure that we were being as fiscally responsible as we could be. And you know, El Paso County has a reputation for being very fiscally conservative and, you know, having low taxes. And I wanted to make sure that we continue to do that, but also look for ways to improve our service within the budget that we already have. So that's been really important to me, and we've been able to do that. I think in a couple of ways we've really stepped up our attention to our roads which, you know, the symptom of that is that we've had a lot of road work. So that can be a little bit frustrating for folks too, but putting more of our resources into our roads, making sure that we are making sure our Public Works department is, you know, keeping up with the times, keeping up with technology, making sure we are doing everything we can to provide the best service for those tax dollars. I'm really proud of some of the things that are happening over there in terms of looking for new technologies to deal with our roads and make sure that we are being as efficient as possible. So that's a huge one for me, is just the entire budget and making sure that we're really, you know, keeping a tight handle on that. And we've done some other processes that have made all of that, that budgeting process which is very long. We start, you know, early on and get finished up at the end of the year, but that has been really important to me. And as far as the rest, I guess, of the term, and it's something I've worked on the first two, but I'm really hoping to see some greater progress on is dealing with our concerns over water sufficiency and long-term water supply for, especially, the unincorporated area of my district out in the east. That is a really tough problem to solve, if you will. And it's also very interesting because it doesn't fall under direct authority of the County, and that's something that isn't always well understood.

But the County does not provide water to anyone. We are involved in, you know, the process of land use, and so there's some conversations that we have around water, but it's a little bit complicated because of the way we interact with the state. So, you know, I want to make sure that our residents have long-term, sustainable water, and that is an area that I live in, so I'm personally affected by and, you know, it's a concern. And there's a lot of rumors out there, quite frankly, and there's a lot of – just a lot of information about, you know, where we're at and it's, to be honest with you, it's very complicated. We have very complicated water laws here in Colorado. So that's one of the things I look forward to really continuing on working through is what ways the County can work in concert with our water districts to protect long-term water. There're some cool projects that are happening that, you know, the County has been a little bit of a part of and I hope to be able to see some continuation of that and hopefully really get to a point where we can reassure residents that those are things that the County cares about, and those are things that we're going to continue to work toward, even though it's not directly a responsibility of the County, that we are going to be a partner and making sure that that happens.

Scott: And so, for those residents who may, you know, have heard some of those rumors, right, you're wanting to help dispel some of those rumors, what do you think is the best way for those residents to get those answers and to help have those rumors dispelled?

Carrie: Well, that's a really good question. Because water is so complicated, it really depends on where they're at because there's a lot of variation. So, you know, a lot of people are hearing about the Colorado River and things like that, but that's not necessarily what impacts them if they live on the eastern half of the county. And so, I really think that they have to contact their local folks, their local water districts and ask those questions because it's so different based upon where you live and where your water is coming from. And I'm going to do a shameless plug a little bit here. Hope to be putting together a water town hall a little bit down the road here in a couple months and we'll get that information out. And so hopefully all of your listeners can come and join us and join in some of those conversations.

Scott: Excellent, wonderful. And I think this next question goes to that a little bit. In terms of people concerned about water, and as the population in your district grows and as demographics change, how do you adapt to the needs of your community?

Carrie: That's a great question. So, you know one of the things that is most important is that we can continue to provide the same level of services, and so that means that there's a lot of planning that needs to go into that. And so, everything from, you know, when we have growth in the county, our planning department, you know, spends a lot of time figuring out the impacts around transportation, schools, all of those pieces and, you know, making sure that we are assessing those correctly, making sure that, you know, if we need to do road expansions, all of those things are all considered. And that the way that it works here at the county is we have developers plan for that and they have to

take care of those responsibilities when there's growth. And I mean, obviously, that is building growth which generally comes along with population growth. But that's, you know, making sure that we have that balance right in the county to make sure that we continue to expand our infrastructure to maintain what is needed for our residents and make sure, like I said, our services are able to keep up.

Scott: And so, what are some things that you think El Paso County residents should be paying close attention to in the coming months and years? I mean, you've touched on a couple of topics, but what do you see as things that may affect residents here in El Paso County more so than maybe, you know, outside of El Paso County and other states or municipalities?

Carrie: So, I think one of the really important things that we need to be paying attention to as different policies come down from Denver, especially Colorado Springs and El Paso County, we are a very unique community. You know, when I moved here, I was really excited because this community was ranked in one of the top 10 places to raise a family. And I think what we need to be paying attention to are the choices that we make as a community to continue to maintain that. You know, for example, we know that crime and those kind of things are on the rise in most of Colorado, and so Colorado Springs and El Paso County are going to have to really think about how we can continue to be who we are and in a changing Colorado, and I think that paying attention to those things that make us family friendly or important and paying attention to, you know, things like crime that tend to drive out families and business – and business climate is another one of those things too. So, I just think those are things we have to be aware of because, quite frankly, we don't want to be Denver.

Scott: And so, part of your role as County Commissioner, amongst going to many meetings, and I'm sure meetings apply to this as well, is as the legislative liaison for the county. What are some of the county's priorities during this current legislative session?

Carrie: Great question. So yes, I spend quite a bit of time tracking legislation. We have great staff here that I work with to do that and some of our priorities are really trying to maintain our local control. So, meaning, rather than have the state take a top-down approach, making sure that we retain the ability to make decisions for our residents because we are the closest to our residents. So that's an overall, overarching principle that we look for when we're looking at legislation. But you know, some of the other things that I talked about when we talked about considerations for our community moving forward, everything from, you know, how will legislation potentially impact crime, those are really big things that we tend to look for - making sure that our residents are protecting, you know, we care a lot about the Second Amendment here in El Paso County. So that's something that we spend a decent amount of time on is looking for that kind of legislation and making sure that our citizens' rights are protected. So there are quite a few things that we're looking at when we're looking at that legislation and you know business, business-friendly climate, those are things when we start having so many costs handed down to businesses, it really impacts our ability for businesses to

thrive, especially small businesses. And you know, as a previous small business owner myself, those are things, those kind of regulatory burdens that really keep our small businesses from starting and thriving here. So those are really key things that we look at.

Scott: Very good. And as someone who is not super familiar with the legislative session myself, how would you describe the length of the legislative session? How long does it last and what should people expect to come out of those meetings?

Carrie: Yes, the legislative session starts in January and ends in May.

Scott: Okay.

Carrie: And it usually starts out a little bit slower and then ramps up, but you know we've already had several all-nighters up at the capitol, and, you know, the number of bills that come through is usually a little over 600. So, they're – it's pretty rapid-fire. You know, if you're trying to track that you really have to kind of try and narrow your focus on what it is you want to look for because it's a lot coming at you very quickly. But there are a lot of tools out there and different publications to help you kind of track that stuff. But I think, you know, getting engaged in organizations that have similar beliefs that you do or are tracking particular interests of yours. So, you know, I mentioned Second Amendment, there are lots of Second Amendment organizations out there or, you know, maybe you know your concerns are around, you know, regulations for business, whatever those are, if you can find an organization, they can help you kind of stay informed in that huge sea of bills about things that might be concerning to you and let you know when there are opportunities to engage. You know, whether it's to just go up and testify to a committee and talk about the impacts of those things, or, you know, when to write your legislators, that kind of thing. But those are really good ways to plug into those organizations that are similar to things that you're concerned.

Scott: Yeah. And in your opinion now – this is a process where a number of people with a number of different mindsets come into a legislative session and you leave with some decisions made, maybe some decisions not made. In your opinion, why is the process important? You may not always agree with the person that's over there. The, you know, someone who's presenting a bill, but let's maybe put that aside. But just why is the process, in general, an important one for people to be paying attention just as an idea for government in general?

Carrie: Well, good policy is not made in a vacuum. You know, there's a lot of talk today about our political climate and, you know, that can be a difficult thing to experience. But I can also tell you that some of the best policy is made when you have, you know, two sides pushing against each other because it forces them to see another perspective. And so, when you participate in the process by going up and testifying or writing a letter, you are sharing a perspective on how that policy or legislation might affect a specific group of people or specific type of people that, you know, someone else may not be able to voice that. And so, it really is that that discourse is really important and it's

important for all of our legislators to hear all of those voices in the process. Yeah, you may not get the outcome that you want, but at the same point, it is very important we do know that legislators often respond when there's an outcry on one side or another, and you know, that means that it does matter that you participate in the process and get others to come along with you. Because without that feedback, often times you know that policy is not fully vetted, if you will.

Scott: So, we've covered a lot of ground in our conversation today. I was just wondering if there's anything else that you want to add that maybe we haven't talked about yet, or if there's something that you want to reinforce that we've already mentioned.

Carrie: Yeah, we've covered a lot. You know, if there's just, if there's anything that I guess I want to add to the conversation, it is, you know our county is growing, as we've talked about, and that means we're you know, we're gonna see some changes and that's hard sometimes, you know, but at the same point, I want to encourage people that El Paso is a great place to live and we're going to continue to be that. And as I mentioned, we've got some obstacles in the way. Sometimes of policies coming down from the state and things like that. But you know, your county commissioners are here for El Paso County residents and we absolutely want to see El Paso remain a great place to live. And I just, I hope people are encouraged by that, even if they're seeing different things around them and change that is you know, it's just, it's just different, right. And can be intimidating at times. But just knowing that we really do value El Paso County the way El Paso County is, and even though it's changing, we want to do everything we can to keep it that family friendly place that, you know, my family was excited to move to.

Scott: Well, thank you, Commissioner Geitner. I appreciate you taking the time today and for all the work that you do here in El Paso County. So, thank you very much.

Carrie: Thanks for having me, Scott.

Scott: 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.