

## Beyond the Dais Podcast: Episode 5 – An Interview with El Paso County Executive Director of Communications Vernon Stewart

*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 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 Executive Director of Communications, Vernon Stewart. How are you doing today, Vernon?

**Vernon Stewart:** Good. Scott, how about you? Thanks for having me.

**Scott:** I am doing well. Thank you. And full disclosure, Vernon is my boss. So, if we say anything that may not make sense, it's because we have inside jokes because that's how we do it here.

**Vernon:** That's usually what you get.

**Scott:** That's right. So, I wanted to start off – if you could tell everyone a little bit about what your role is here with El Paso County.

**Vernon:** Yeah. So, as you mentioned, I am the Communications Executive Director here at El Paso County. And within this department falls the audio-visual team, the video production team. Also, in this department we have our Public Information and Communications Specialists, and we also have our Open Records Specialist. So, our video production team, they are responsible for putting together all the great video productions that you see coming from the county. And in addition to that, the communications team, they are the ones responsible for sending out the press releases, organizing our events, managing our social media and handling all of our media relations. And then of course the Open Records Specialist. So, he's the one that manages all the public records requests that we get to El Paso County.

**Scott:** Great. And how long have you been here with El Paso County? And if you could also give a little bit of your work history so people can understand kind of where you're coming from.

**Vernon:** Yeah, sure. So, I have been here at El Paso County for almost five months now as of this date. Prior to my arrival here I was the spokesman for the VA down in Biloxi, Mississippi. I was a Public Affairs Officer down there for the last two years and in that role I did the same thing essentially what as to what I'm doing now. I managed all the media relations, oversaw all the social media. I also was the direct respondent for

congressional inquiries as well as managing all of our events, our social media etcetera, etcetera. And prior to that, I was the Public Affairs Officer at the Kansas City VA in Kansas City, Missouri. Essentially the same duties in that role as well. And prior to that position, I was the Public Information Officer for the City of Pensacola in Pensacola, Florida for about five years. And I essentially did the same duties there. I was a small team there, and I was a spokesperson for the mayor and for the City of Pensacola. That was a population of about 60,000. And so, I oversaw media relations, social media, all the press releases, press events and all of the community outreach for the city of Pensacola and for the mayor of Pensacola.

**Scott:** Great. So, I mean, you talk about doing things down in the southern states, down there in Florida and in Georgia. Can you talk to me about why you came out to Colorado? What was appealing about that?

**Vernon:** Yeah, absolutely. So, I grew up in Pensacola. That's where I'm from, down in that region, and ever since I was a kid, you know, you always hear the stories, you see the photos, the great videos of what's happening in Colorado. And you know, I've always been an outdoors type person. I love being outdoors, hiking, fishing, hunting, all those types of things. And you know, they always say Colorado's an outdoorsman's paradise. And you know, being an outdoorsman, as I consider myself, I've always wanted to, you know, visit Colorado and ultimately live here at some point. And an opportunity came up and here I am.

**Scott:** Very good. Yeah, I am not quite the outdoorsman that you claim to be. I actually don't know if you're an outdoorsman or not. You could be pulling the wool over my eyes.

**Vernon:** I could be.

**Scott:** But yeah, I've definitely heard much the same. And so, before you started all this work history with Florida and in Biloxi, you were with the Marines.

**Vernon:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Scott:** So, can you tell me a little bit about that and how serving in the Marines helped you take on these various leadership roles that you've been on?

**Vernon:** Yeah, for sure. So, I, like I said, I was in Pensacola, Florida, and that's where I'm from. My dad, he's a retired Naval Chief Warrant Officer Fourth Class, so I grew up in a military home. My dad was very, very much the typical Navy man, very by the book and, you know, a lot of discipline in the home growing up. And that was something that I was very used to. And you know, when I was getting to a point where I was about to graduate high school, I had to make a decision whether I wanted to pursue a football scholarship or if I wanted to join the military. At that time, I was tired of school. I wanted to do something else. You know, I saw all the great adventures that my dad did. I saw all his, you know, I always see his pictures on the wall of all the great things and all the fun that he had during his time in the military. And you know, I wanted to do something a little bit different, you know. I wanted to get away from home experience and see the

world a little bit. And so, I decided to go into the Marines. I went into the Marines right after high school and I enjoyed my time in the military. And, you know, it was a great experience. And for the listeners out there that, you know, have veterans or retirees as family members or friends you are – or even a veteran or retiree yourself – you are very familiar with, you know, the camaraderie of being in the military and you know, being able to meet different types of people from all walks of life. And, in the leadership role, you know, it's very beneficial to someone as a leader because you learned how to interact and how to manage and how to work with different types of people from all walks of life. And that was something that I kind of honed in on. I spent a lot of time with different types of people, just from everywhere in the country. Different personalities, different work styles, different backgrounds, and just being able to adapt and be versatile, being able to meet different needs of different types of people and in the leader in the leadership role, that's extremely important because people are motivated by different things and just understanding that at a young age was extremely beneficial for me during my entire career.

**Scott:** That's good. So, getting back to the county a little bit, why is your role so critical to the success of El Paso County? Not trying to put you on the spot here, but tell me why it's important to have an executive director of communications?

**Vernon:** Yeah, absolutely. So, here in El Paso County, in county governments and city, any municipal, local type of governments, federal government, any government work or even any organization for that matter, there's a lot of good things that happen within organizations. And having someone that knows how to be able to tell that story, how to communicate all the great things that are happening and even being able to navigate things that are not going so well is critical because, as you mentioned, I mean it's being, you know, there's a lot of success stories that come out of El Paso County and just being able to tell those stories is extremely important. Because, you know, we are residents, visitors, those who are familiar with our region, you know, they want to know what's going on. And especially being a resident, your tax dollars are going to something. So, what exactly are your tax dollars going to? Being able to tell that story and being able to shine that light on, you know, what your county government is doing, and if it's something that you can be passionate about, or being able to, you know engage them and let them know that this is what we're doing. You know you're being heard. We're taking your feedback, we're putting it in this, we're doing that. So, being able to communicate to them so that they're well informed as to what is happening in their local community is extremely important.

**Scott:** Yeah, that's good. And I'm wondering if maybe you could expand a little bit more on what some of your priorities that you've identified for communications within the county. I mean, you talked a little about having that transparency with residents, but what are some of those sorts of top-list priorities that you've identified that you want to be able to bring to the county?

**Vernon:** Yeah, so one of the top priorities for me is to be able to engage the citizens directly. You know there is an old school of thought where you know as a communications person you send out a press release and then the media can cover it and then you're reliant on the media to tell that story. But oftentimes, nothing against the media, but you know they're time-limited oftentimes. And so being able to communicate to the residents directly, engage them directly in a platform such as this, like a podcast, is extremely beneficial to the resident because they want to get their – some residents – they want to get their information unfiltered, unedited, un-chopped. And being able to, as a county government, tell our story in its entirety is one of the things that, you know, we're looking to explore. And just being able to engage the citizens directly is one of my top priorities. Because we – it does come to a two-way dialogue, getting some of that information from the residents and then communicating what we're doing about it and letting them know that they're being heard and engaging them in a direct fashion is something that we're always wanting to do and look forward to doing.

**Scott:** Yeah, no, I agree. I think, as you can, you know, being open and transparent with residents is really important. I mean, you know, we are both taxpayers here in El Paso County and you know, I want to know what my tax dollars are going to. I want to know why the county is making specific decisions, right? And so, I think, to your point, being able to share that information directly from the county and not necessarily going through an intermediary is a really important way of doing that. And then that sort of leads me to the question then is how is the county currently communicating with its residents and what are some things you're looking forward to doing in the future in that way?

**Vernon:** Yeah, we're very fortunate here at El Paso County. We have a really great communications team, such as yourself. We have a really great social media presence now, and we have really great communicators and a very creative staff here. And some of the ways that we're communicating to our residents is – you know we're being, we're trying to move in a more dynamic and evolving environment. You know, the environment, all the channels and platforms are changing every day and they're growing and evolving and just being able to keep up with that, it's a challenge for us day-to-day just keeping up with the trends and what ways we can better engage our citizens. Fact of the matter is, our citizens are very diverse. They come from many different generations, and being able to touch each and every one of them on the platform of their choice is something that you know, we always put at the forefront of our strategy. Oftentimes we're getting away from the typical print news. You know, that's not something that you see is prevalent in today's society as you did maybe 20-30 years ago. And so, just being able to adapt to that, and come up with different ways to engage them, whether it be social media through a podcast, digital media, such as a website, or reach out to them directly – newsletter, town halls, in-person, that's something that we're always working towards.

**Scott:** That's great and you mentioned that two-way dialogue you want to have with the residents of El Paso County. Why is it important to have those avenues for two-way dialogue between the county and as residents, and are there ways that currently exist that those residents can have that two-way dialogue? Is that something you're looking forward to in the future? Can you talk a little bit about that?

**Vernon:** Yeah, absolutely. And it's important to always have that two-way dialogue because one way is – the only way that – the only thing that it benefits is, it only benefits the one person. It's always one-sided. We're getting all of our information out. I mean that's one way to look at it, but we wanna get the feedback from the residents. You know, what can we do better? You know, what are ways that we can improve? Are you receiving the information that you even care about? Understanding all of those variables is extremely important as a communications professional. You know, some of the things that we're looking at doing in the future is we're getting ready to launch here in the future an external newsletter. There'll be a mechanism built into that where we can receive immediate feedback from residents. We're looking at launching different platforms that residents can directly contact communication staff, their commissioners. I mean, there's already mechanisms in place for residents to contact their commissioners directly, but we're just wanting to expand on that a little bit. You know, we want to get that, we want to receive that feedback. You know, we're very active on our social media. You know, if you follow us on any of our social media accounts, send us messages, leave any comments, you know we see all of that and you know we take action on anything that needs action taken. And so, we're very conscientious about what's being said and what's, you know, what our residents are saying. We try to pay attention to as much of it as possible and we do take it all into consideration and do take action when action is needed. You know, we'll forward it. If we see something come through on a Facebook post or a comment left on a YouTube video, you know, we'll forward that to the correct point of contacts for action if needed. And oftentimes, residents will see that their concerns or issues are addressed, may not work out, that they may not always work out the way that they want it to, but we see it and we do take action.

**Scott:** I think that's good. And I think it's also important to highlight that it could be construed as a bit of opening a can of worms when you're asking for that public feedback and saying, “we want to listen to you, we want that feedback”. Tell me why that's something that maybe you're not concerned about, or maybe if you are a little concerned about it, about why it's still important, even though it might put you in a difficult situation, it might put you in an uncomfortable place, why is it important to still take that on?

**Vernon:** Yeah, so there is a good give and take with that. So, in a population like El Paso County, that's growing significantly every day. People love this area, people are wanting to live in this area, visit this area. And so, it is, it is oftentimes like opening a can of worms, “hey, we want to receive your feedback”. You know, when we're talking about a population of seven-hundred, eight-hundred thousand people, there could be a

potential for a lot of that feedback coming in all at once. And so, we do open ourselves up, but I mean that's, I mean that's part of the deal. That's something that we're willing to take on because, you know, there could be something out there that definitely needs attention. And just because it may be overload for staff to receive all the feedback, that doesn't negate the fact that we need to receive the feedback from, you know, at all. So, you know, it's something that we're willing to work through. You know, like I said, we have a great staff in place that can navigate and mitigate a lot of those concerns and issues. Oftentimes you'll find that a lot of it's just compliments. You know, we get a lot of compliments about what we do here at El Paso County. So, we want to see that. We want to be able to share that with staff.

**Scott:** That's great. And I mean you talk about staff; you are the Executive Director of Communications and that just doesn't mean to an external audience, to the residents of El Paso County, that also includes internally the employees of El Paso County. Can you talk a little bit about your role with internal employees and why having them as a stakeholder is just as important as the residents of El Paso County?

**Vernon:** Yeah, absolutely. And that was one of the things that I identified early on when I first, when I first got here as an opportunity for our communications team is to engage our staff. You know, we want our staff to be better informed because what you get with a better-informed staff, a well-informed staff is, you know, they start becoming ambassadors out in the community. You know, a fact of the matter is a lot of our staff members are involved in different volunteer groups, different organizations outside of here. You know they're – you have staff members that are part of their PTA. You know I help coach my daughter's lacrosse teams, you know, and often times you'll find that staff, we have lives outside of here, and having them better informed as to what's happening within the county within our operations and informing them as to what we're doing to better the community increases their ability to be able to inform the residents and their neighbors and their- a lot of these different organizations that they're a part of out in that community. Because, you know, the fact of the matter is that, you know, they are our frontline, you know our frontline ambassadors and, you know, if they are well equipped to be able to communicate information about a project or something that's going on with a different initiative at the county, I mean that's less work for us as communicators. You know, because they're out there doing some of that work for us. And one of the ways that we have been doing that is we're engaging our staff in different ways. You know, we send out a weekly newsletter to let them know about all the happenings and all the different operations, all the different great things and you know different projects and initiatives we have going on here at El Paso County. So, we send that out weekly. That was something that wasn't done previously. And so, it's just one of the things that we're trying to do to better equip them out in the community and essentially make them ambassadors.

**Scott:** That's great. And I think too, you talk about getting feedback from residents of El Paso County. Tell me about how valuable it is to also get that feedback from those internal stakeholders, from the employees of El Paso County.

**Vernon:** Yeah, their feedback is extremely valuable because you like, you know, kind of what I mentioned previously, they're the ones that are out in these different organizations in different meetings. And you know, when someone finds out that they're, that they work at El Paso County, if they have a question or concern, you know they'll take it to them. Say, "you work for the county, don't you?" And they'll ask them a question, or they'll bring forward a concern, and you know, then they'll bring it to, they'll bring it to whoever the point of contact is once they're back in the office. And so having that two-way dialogue with not only staff, but the community, is extremely important and you know, I can't speak highly enough about our staff. I mean they're, you know, they come to work every day with, all of the staff that I've encountered, great attitudes, they're very passionate about what we do here at the county and you know they're great ambassadors for the community and they're always bringing forward any concerns. I get emails all the time from staff about things that we can do better, things that- different compliments that we're getting out in the community. So, there's a lot that goes into it and you know, I'm just fortunate to be a part of this great team.

**Scott:** Wonderful. And I just wanted to give you an opportunity – is there anything else that you wanna add, anything else that El Paso County Communications team is doing that people should know about?

**Vernon:** Yeah, absolutely. So, as you can see, we're getting pretty creative on ways to reach out to you. We're launching this podcast. You know, we're ramping up our social media presence. We have a broadcast channel. We're starting to live stream a lot more meetings. You know, we're reaching out to you directly. We have plans of launching this external newsletter. So, there's different things. We're trying to be as innovative and as creative as possible to reach you, to make sure that you're getting the information and news that you care about. You know, not everybody will care about roads, not everybody will care about a certain project. But our goal is to get as much of that information out through all the different platforms that are available to us, and then let you kind of digest what's relevant, what's important to you. That's our goal. Like I said, we have a great team here, not just in the communications department, but El Paso County as a whole. And I'm extremely grateful and fortunate to be a part of the great team, great leadership with the County Administrator, Brett Waters, our commissioners. All five of them are very passionate about their districts, very passionate about El Paso County. So, there's great leadership in place. That stuff trickles downhill, and I'm excited to be a part of this mission and I'm looking forward to working with all of our staff and all of the residents in the community to make El Paso County as great a place as it can be.

**Scott:** Great. And I think on that note too, if you could just let people know where they can find this information, right? We got some social accounts you want to shout out?

**Vernon:** Absolutely. We're active on all the social media accounts, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube. We've also- we got this podcast that we're launching, Beyond the Dais, very excited about that. An external newsletter will be coming out soon. So, anywhere you can, anywhere you can find any of your information, we're pretty active on. We're even on TikTok, we have a TikTok channel as well. So just look up-

**Scott:** Oh no.

**Vernon:** Yeah, it's not for everybody, but kind of what I said, you know people, different generations get their news in different ways and we're just wanting to touch everybody. So just look up El Paso County, Colorado and you'll find us. And if there's ever any questions, you can always e-mail us at E-P-C-P-I-O at El Paso Co dot com. That's [epcpio@elpasoco.com](mailto:epcpio@elpasoco.com). One of our great communicators will be able to take that message and get back to you and better assist you.

**Scott:** Great. Well, thank you Vernon. I appreciate you taking the time today. I think this is really valuable to let people know again, you know, like you were talking about, you know, this is something that we want to share with the community. We want them to be involved with it and you know, to use those different social media channels to reach out to us if they feel like there's something they want to find out about again. So, thank you very much for taking the time today.

**Vernon:** Yeah, absolutely Scott, thank you so much. Looking forward to the great work that you continue to do and looking forward to, looking forward to engaging with the community. So, thank you again and thank you to all the listeners.

**Scott:** Thank you. Well, 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. So, thank you for tuning in and we'll see you next time.