

Race For County Exec: Jake Zimmerman

[FENSKE] So today, we're going to talk about five agenda items that were identified by the voters of St. Louis County. We asked them what was important to them.

They gave us an earful. And from there, we developed these five agenda items that we're going to talk about today. The first one is growing the region.

There's a lot of concern about the fact that the regional population has stagnated. What would you do as county executive to make St. Louis County more attractive to residents and to businesses?

[ZIMMERMAN] I think there's a couple of different answers to that, and they have to work in tandem. The first one, the biggest one, is we need more human beings, period.

And if you look at the regional trajectory over the last few years, the only place that growth has really come from is immigrants. And in particular, it's come from refugee communities. And so when you think about the revitalization of the Gravois Corridor, right, with people coming after the war in Bosnia, and you can go back earlier, right, go back to the 80s and 90s, and look at what the arrival of Vietnamese immigrants did for the South Grand neighborhood.

So obviously, given the people who were in charge in Washington, DC, right now who seem to have abandoned America's traditional promise of welcoming people to these shores, we've got to be forward-thinking, because this moment will change, and the goons in Washington won't be in those jobs forever. And when the moment comes that this country opens its doors again, if we want our next revitalization corridor, we got to be ready. And that means language assistance, and it means the city and the county and the municipalities and regional jurisdictions working together so that people feel like this is a good place for them to come, start a small business, bring your family members.

Because more than anything else, it's what's given us population growth in challenged parts of the community. And you'll notice, Sarah, that I gave you examples there from both the county and the city, and that's deliberate. The county wins when there's more population here, even if people choose to live in the exurbs in St. Charles County.

The county wins even if people choose to live in the city. Grow the base of humans. Grow the base of services.

We all win. And that flows to the other side of the answer to your question, which is we got to get out of our own way. We got to beat back this regional inferiority complex where we're forever comparing ourselves to some coastal city or Chicago and telling ourselves we're not good enough.

This place has extraordinary resources. We got the best free culture in the country, and we still have affordable homes. You can live in a decent school district, or you can live in the city, and you can be close to your job, close to the cultural resources that you care about.

Like, come on. This region, and especially St. Louis County, has a lot to offer. We got to not be shy about selling it.

[FENSKE] So there's a lot of people trying to sell that right now, making the very case that you're making about all the great things we have here. It feels like even locally, they're not really winning that battle. It seems like there's a lot of doomsaying.

There's a lot of pessimism about the future. What would you do to try to change that?

[ZIMMERMAN] Well, one thing we could do is we could try to have our government stop being an embarrassment and start being something that people can be proud of. Any time I pick up the paper or your newsletter or turn on the TV, and I see another dumb story with politicians squabbling with one another, who's to blame, who started the fist fight, whatever it may be, I would observe that that's not just goofy entertainment, which so much of our politics has turned into.

That's the message we're sending to the state, to the broader region, to the country, of the kind of place St. Louis is. So, you know, live your values, be the change you want to see. If you want the region to be proud of itself, the most important thing that a government leader can do is try to act like an adult and try to give people something they can be proud of.

[FENSKE] So you mentioned the idea of the city and the county working more together. There's been a lot of talk about some form of government consolidation could help with our regional issues. Do you support giving serious consideration to a city-county merger?

[ZIMMERMAN] So my litmus test for any regional cooperation proposal, and this applies whether you're talking about working cooperatively with St. Charles County or Jefferson County, or the folks in St. Louis City or on the other side of the Mississippi River or what have you, my litmus test is always what does it do for our parks and what does it do for our potholes, right? Because I think there's a lot of potential regional cooperation on the table that could save you a few bucks and get you better services.

But if you look at it through that lens, then I think you're asking the question that your viewers ought to be asking themselves and probably are, which is, what's in it for me? When you think about why Better Together failed, partly it failed because they wanted to make Steve Stenger the grand poobah of everything and maybe that wasn't a great idea.

[FENSKE] Just maybe.

[ZIMMERMAN] But maybe criminals should not be made super political overlords.

But more broadly than that, think about it, in some level the politics of this was not let's consult the community and ask people what they think, it was take your medicine, this is good for you, a bunch of business leaders in a room have decided that this is what you should do and we're going to shove it down your throat. That's never the right way to do reform. So whether you talk about something like the city reentering the county as one more municipality, or whether you talk about combining duplicative fire services as some of

the cities in the county have recently talked about, or whether you talk about getting rid of the overlapping layer of thousands of taxing district permutations that we deal with in the county, I think if we focus it back on how can you save a few bucks while improving public services, ask the question that way, and I think the voters might give you an answer you'd be interested in hearing.

[FENSKE] So regional leaders often prioritize their own parochial power over what's best for the region. What could you point to in your path that shows that you put the region first as opposed to your own smaller interest?

[ZIMMERMAN] That's a great question, right? Because I think it's easy to say that we shouldn't fight over slices of the pie. We should be working on growing the pie.

And I think the thing that I would point to is this boring, wonky job that I do as the county assessor.

[FENSKE] It's boring.

[ZIMMERMAN] I mean, come on.

Maybe you get up in the morning and your heart is set aflutter at the idea of the valuation of real and personal property. But I find that I don't have the sexiest job in regional politics. But here's the thing.

So much of what county government does oughtn't to be sexy and it shouldn't be on the front page of the paper. There's not a Democratic or a Republican way to make sure that the nurses at the jail get paid so that the prisoners don't riot. But that was a big fight in the county council just this past week.

And it's crazy to me. Save the political disagreement for places where there should actually be political disagreement. So my record, following on that, I've always said there's not a Democratic or a Republican way to assess a house.

There's a right way and a wrong way. There's a fair way and an unfair way. And so when I think about the times when I've been in a high-profile skirmish, when I'm on the front page of the paper, usually it's because I'm doing battle with the big corporate tax representatives or with the casinos or the people who were hiding their private airplanes.

They're all different stories, but they're all kind of the same story, which is somebody, usually somebody big and powerful, is trying to take advantage of the system, get themselves a benefit, and it would be politically easier to let them get away with it. But if you do, everybody else gets hosed. If you do, everybody else has to pay a little bit more.

And one of the mantras I've tried to live by is you just do the right thing, even if it's hard, even if it's politically difficult sometimes. But you'll notice that in all of those times when I have found myself in a high-profile fight, it's always because of something about substance. And this comes back to the question that you're actually asking, right? Which is, what have you done in your career to make things better on a regional basis? And that's my real answer.

My real answer is I save the fireworks and I save the theatrics for when it's about something that matters. This region has too many problems. We have too much low-hanging fruit to pick to waste another second on the kind of nonsense that holds us back.

[FENSKE] So at the same time, as county executive, you would have 80-something municipalities where there might be leaders of those municipalities who aren't necessarily approaching their job in such an altruistic spirit. What would you do to get those 80-something municipalities working together rather than competing with each other?

[ZIMMERMAN] So first of all, I don't know what you're talking about. Every elected official in every city and the county council is a model like the ancient Athenian Greek polis, it seems to me.

Look, obviously, St. Louis County is a fragmented set of different pots of leadership. I choose to see that as a strength and not as a weakness. If you go out there in this community and you ask people if they like their mayor, if they like their city council member, if they like their school board, most of them will say yes.

And if you tell them that you wanna get rid of their city or you wanna get rid of their police department or you wanna get rid of their fire department, they will be hopping mad. And there's a reason for that. The reason is that one of the strengths of St. Louis County is we have good public services, we have good parks, and some of those things are run by the county and some of them are run by the cities.

We cannot live in a world where government officials are forever pointing the finger at one another and saying, we got a problem and it's your fault. We have plenty of challenges and I, for one, don't care whose fault they are. And I also don't care who gets the credit for fixing them.

Back to the job I do right now, I am very familiar with what it is to do low profile, non-sexy politics. And if the county needs to be a little lower profile and a little less sexy, let somebody else take the credit. Great, but let's fix some things first.

[FENSKE] So we talked about your plan to grow the region, but a big part of what's happening in St. Louis County is it's an aging population. What would you do as county executive to make St. Louis County a place where young people wanna put down roots?

[ZIMMERMAN] Yeah, I mean, that's really mission critical because if you wanna take the population of the county above a million and you wanna get the population of the MSA, the broader region, back on an upward trajectory, immigrants aren't enough and new employment opportunities aren't enough. Both of those things are incredibly important.

You also need young people to feel like there's a reason to stick around here. And let's be mindful of our competitive advantages and let's appreciate that we're not New York and we're not Silicon Valley and we shouldn't try to be. We shouldn't pretend to be something we aren't.

But what we are is a spectacular place when you're thinking about starting a family and you're wondering where you can afford to be in a decent school district or a nice suburban home with a little bit of grass in the backyard. On those kind of metrics, we do great, not just compared to coastal cities where it's impossible to afford to live, but peer cities in the middle of the country. Compared to our competitors, the quality of life you can get for your housing dollar is pretty dang good.

So it goes back to what I said to you at the beginning of this interview, which is that if someone wants to make their home here, I don't really care which side of the river you're on and I don't care which side of the city county line you're on. If you're 22 years old and you're fresh out of SLU or Wash U or UMSL or what have you, and you're trying to decide whether to start your small business here or go someplace else, dear God, I want you to do it here. And if the reason you wanna stay here is because you love the culture on Cherokee Street and it's vitally important to you to be near your favorite bar and your favorite music venue, I mean, look, at my stage of life, that's not my cup of tea.

But what I would say is that by you choosing to put down some roots there in South St. Louis or wherever it may be, you're doing the county a favor. You're doing the regional economy a favor. And so making this an open and welcoming place, but also making sure there's a vibrant startup economy, showing support for people like the ArchGrants folks who are doing great work to say, hey, if you've got a bright idea and you can win a competition, you can get funded.

You can start your business in St. Louis and not have to go to Boston. Like more of that, please.

[FENSKE] So the second topic that came up on our agenda is something that you've already touched on quite a few times here, and this is functional government.

People told us, here's a quote, I'm sure you've heard before, the county council needs to stop their infighting. What would you do early in your administration to make sure that county government isn't defined by that dysfunction?

[ZIMMERMAN] So since I've already talked about this a couple of times, let me answer that on a holistic level. What's the thing I would do? I would remember the old adage that God gave you two ears and one mouth for a reason.

Seek to understand before you seek to be understood. My view of the decline in decorum in St. Louis County government for these last few years, first of all, it didn't start with this council and it didn't start with Sam Page. It really started with Steve Stenger.

And when you make a criminal your top leader, bad things are going to happen. And it's no surprise that there was fighting and a lack of trust. But that lack of trust has gotten worse in large part because people just keep talking past each other.

And everyone just seems to want to score points, to prove the other person wrong, to say it's their fault. And to me, like the challenges we face are so significant that that blame game is just not helpful now if it ever was. When you've got an 80 plus million-dollar budget hole that needs to be addressed, I don't care whose fault it is.

What I care about is how we work together in good faith to get it done. And if as a leader, sometimes you gotta take a step back and not be the person in front of the camera and let somebody else go first, that's just fine with me. Because I mean, look, if you elect me to run this government as the chief executive, to me, that county council is a board of directors.

If you run a big business, you, no matter how big a deal you think you are, those people are your bosses. The voters have elected those county council members to be stewards of public funds and of the public trust. And so it's about time that we built a respectful relationship because at the end of the day, they have tough choices on their plate.

And I don't care if you're in politics or the private sector or a charity or a school or what have you. If you don't feel respected, if you don't feel listened to, if you feel bullied, then you're not gonna trust the other person and then you'll never be able to work together.

[FENSKE] I'm intrigued by the idea of the county executive, being almost the executive director and that you answer to this board of directors because it is a separately elected position directly by the voters.

And it seems like there's some things the county council has come up with that at least Sam Page has made the case. These things could be really disastrous. The idea of them being able to fire department heads, things like that.

How would you get that balance right of listening to them, but also maybe holding them in check if they wanna take things too far?

[ZIMMERMAN] Well, look, I've seen this council do some things I agree with and I've seen them do some other stuff that probably seemed kind of dumb to me. But my general view is that when I look at the stuff that I've disagreed with the most, the stuff that I look at and say, boy, that doesn't seem wise, usually it didn't come out of nowhere. Usually it came out of frustration.

Usually it came out of that dirty so-and-so wouldn't talk to me, right? The whole fire the department directors thing. And yeah, I don't think that's how you run a railroad, but why did that happen? It happened because someone in their wisdom instituted a ban on department directors speaking with members of that council. Well, look, if you say to the people who controlled the purse strings, the people who pay the bills, I'm sorry, I'm not gonna let people talk to you, bad things will come of that.

So I guess my view is if you don't want bad policy, don't do bad human relations and give people a reason to trust you and see what comes from that.

[FENSKE] So you mentioned the county budget. This is obviously a big problem when it comes to things like functional government, just that we're in this budget crunch, revenue is flat, the cost of everything seems to be rising.

There's no federal funding coming in like we kind of got used to. How would you plan to keep providing basic services at an acceptable level in light of the budget crunch that the county's in?

[ZIMMERMAN] Yeah, this is a terribly real problem, like the bill is coming due. And it does go back to the bigger problem, which is the lack of trust.

Because the elected officials don't trust each other, because the politicians are squabbling, nobody can agree on the numbers. And when nobody can agree on the numbers, like take the question of whether the county should buy a new building or lease new space or tear down the existing building or retrofit the building. You ask yourself, I hope, why is this a political issue, right? There's nothing Democratic or Republican about how much it costs to get the asbestos out of the walls.

But no one can agree with each other about how much it costs to get the asbestos out of the walls. And that's because no one trusts each other. When there is a lack of trust, there is going to be a lack of substantive agreement.

The fundamental challenge with the county budget is a challenge that has been true for over a decade. And that is that less money is coming in the door than is going out the door year over year. And anyone who has ever tried to balance their household finances or anybody who's ever opened a barber shop or any other small business knows that if more money goes out the door than comes in the door, you have a problem.

And the only reason that those chickens haven't come home to roost is that there has been one-time money falling from the heavens, so to speak, again and again for north of a decade. It happened with infrastructure money from the Biden administration. It happened before that with aid to the states and localities from the Obama administration.

It happened in the form of legal settlements. It happened with the Proposition P money for the police. And every single time elected officials did what politicians do, which is they said, we won't solve the problem.

We'll just spend some of this one-time money and paper it over. But to me, that's burning the furniture in order to keep warm, right? That's not how you can keep something sustainable long-term. And now we're at the last stop on the railroad.

And the last stop on the railroad is the Rams money. And that's big bucks. One-time money should be used for one-time expenses and ideally to do something transformational.

And I don't know what the correct transformational idea is. I bet there's eight different good proposals out there, right? That kind of money is a building, but it's also a giant neighborhood revitalization program or a jobs program or a park or what have you. But what it isn't, what it can't be, is duct tape to solve your budget problems.

Because if you do that, you'll blow the money. And a year and a half later, according to the best estimates, you'll be right back where you started. So if we don't want the county to go bankrupt, we've got to get out of this mindset and we've got to do the same thing I did when I first became county assessor.

I inherited a budget whose bank account was trending downward. We were in the red and now we're in the black. And that's not an easy thing to do.

You have to distinguish between wants and needs and you have to live within your means and make tough choices but every human being in St. Louis County does that every day of their life anyway. They should expect the same thing out of their government.

[FENSKE] Are there specific areas where you'd say, I can see some cuts in this department or this is a service we don't have to provide anymore?

[ZIMMERMAN] Sure, let me pick a couple of just obvious examples for you because I look at this and it frustrates me.

The Department of Revenue, which I have some pretty good visibility into because I run the office that tells you what your stuff is worth before the other guys send the taxes, spent millions of dollars on a new computer system that works much more poorly than the existing one that they had. And I spent years telling the council and the executive that they were making a bad decision and for what seemed like bureaucratic turf war reasons, they barreled ahead. And now you live in a world where not only did they blow millions of dollars that they shouldn't have spent but they're providing worse customer service, making it harder to do the job with the existing human beings.

They can't answer their phone on a regular basis. And if you think back to December, you had senior citizens waiting in two hour lines outside in the cold at an office in South County just to pay their taxes. And as a fun bonus on top of that, for months afterwards, you had tax checks that people had paid sitting there undeposited because they didn't get around to opening the envelopes.

So that's money not earning interest for the county. So spending millions of dollars in order to provide worse customer service and not bring the resources in is a great example of something you ought not to be doing. And my view is that there are a number of other examples of that in county government.

I don't think it was the shrewdest move when the health department didn't like what was going on at the animal shelter so they fired all the volunteers. When you're having trouble making ends meet, I don't think firing volunteers is a brilliant solution. We could go on and on about this, but what you'll notice from my answers here is that not one of them will ever fit into a 30 second TV commercial.

This is the wonky business of running a government, of balancing the budget, of providing public services. If you don't wanna live in a world where parks are shutting down, if you don't wanna live in a world where cops aren't on the street, if you don't wanna live in a world where people's taxes don't go through the roof, then you have to do the hard stuff and you have to do that first.

[FENSKE] So the animal shelter is actually something that we heard from our focus groups on.

Here's a quote from somebody who attended. With the aging county animal shelter being too small and the huge increase in intake over the last few years, why isn't the county working on a plan to expand the shelter to make more room? What plans are they

discussing to reduce intake, like requiring microchips, free spay and neuter, or more? Now that the volunteers have been fired, what would you do about the animal control situation going forward?

[ZIMMERMAN] I think it's pretty clear that that shelter has been a mess for some time. And this goes back to the Stenger administration and really even before that.

And it's just been true for a long time that that county shelter has not been run to the standards of what some of the private nonprofit entities in town have. Now, that's a little bit unfair because the animal shelter is required to do things like take in any stray that they find that those other shelters don't have. They have a genuinely tougher job.

But think back to when the Animal Protective Association, the APA, took over that shelter on a contract basis and from everything that I'm told, made significant improvements. And it seemed like things were moving forward and then it collapsed. It collapsed in more political infighting and finger pointing, and it became part of the war between the council and the executive.

So I expressly take no position on who's right and who's wrong. I don't care about who's right and who's wrong, but we can't have basic public services like that get caught up in the political squabbling. There is not a Democratic or a Republican way to rescue a cat.

I'm a cat person. We have a cat at home that is a proud shelter adoptee. And I bet there are some staunch Republican viewers of this program who also like cats and also do not like me.

And that is fine, right? On the list of places where I should disagree with my Republican friends, this just isn't one of them.

[FENSKE] So you also mentioned the St. Louis County headquarters, the Lawrence K. Roos building. There has been a lot of discussion about what to do.

It doesn't have the sprinklers, there's some problems, or it hasn't been kept up to date. What would you do with that building?

[ZIMMERMAN] Well, look, obviously that building is the most perfect structure that you've ever seen in all. I mean, if you enjoy giant post-nuclear apocalypse-sized cockroaches, let me tell you, this is the government building for you.

[FENSKE] That's not an exaggeration?

[ZIMMERMAN] That is not an exaggeration. Oh my God, the giant cockroaches I've seen there, especially if you work after hours. When you're the boss, sometimes you work weird hours and sometimes I have to be there late at night after everybody is gone and the lights are off.

That's when the big cockroaches come out. So yeah, real talk, that building has problems. And the biggest problem is that it needs sprinklers and its exemption from the Clayton Municipal Code runs out in another year.

And in order to put sprinklers in, you have to take the asbestos out and that costs big bucks. So one obvious possibility is to spend the money and put in the sprinklers. And another obvious possibility is to say, this thing is unsavable, tear it down to the studs and sell the dirt to someone who can build something in Clayton.

And another possible solution is to buy a cheap building somewhere nearby and keep some folks in Clayton because the charter requires the headquarters to be there. And yet another solution is to use leased space. All of these are plausibly good ideas.

And I think that you as the citizen shouldn't care what the correct answer is, as long as we answer one question, which is what's the cheapest solution that saves the most of your tax dollars and gets you the services you need. You as the citizen don't care how big the cockroaches in my office are. What you do care about is how bad is the parking? Will I be forced to wait in a long line in the cold? And are you wasting my tax dollars building some government palace that you didn't need to build? Those are the real questions here.

So let's stop the political squabbling. Let's stop fighting about the building and let's get a straight answer about what it actually costs to do each of those things. And then let's figure out the one that gives the taxpayers the best deal.

That's the right answer.

[FENSKE] And that could include moving a sizable quantity of workers out of Clayton. If that was the least expensive, you'd be in favor.

[ZIMMERMAN] The charter requires the county to keep its headquarters in Clayton. And I think we ought to comply with the law. What that means on the margin, obviously not every county employee works in Clayton.

Right now in my office, a good chunk of my staff works out of Clayton, but many of my field appraisers work out of South County or North County field offices. Because it saves you money. Because I have to pay 60 cents or whatever it is for every mile that an appraiser drives to go look at houses.

I made a promise years ago that there would never again be a drive-by assessment. So what does that mean? It means dozens of human beings every day go out and ring your doorbell and say, hey, it's time for me to look at your house. That costs money.

I prefer to spend less of your money on gas mileage so that I can have more appraisers. And the way to do that is to start them from South County and North County field offices so that they are closer to the people they serve. Again, none of this is sexy and none of this is 30-second TV ad material, but this is how you make government work.

[FENSKE] So the third issue identified on our citizens agenda is affordability. This came up time and again. How would you make sure housing is available for lower and middle-income St. Louis County residents? Do you think government should play a role in that?

[ZIMMERMAN] To me, this is possibly the number one overarching substantive challenge in this town.

And I'm gonna share some sobering numbers with you. I see this because, you know, I'm the assessor. My job is to tell you what your house is worth.

And depending on what happens with that number, somebody else, the schools and the fire department will send you a tax bill. And you may or may not like that number. But my job is not to try and make money for the school district or the fire department, right? My job is to get your house right, what it could actually sell for.

And here's the thing that I've seen since the pandemic, these last several years. If you live in a million plus dollar house in Clayton or Ladue or what have you, the value of that home has probably gone up a little bit over the last few years. On average, maybe four or 5%, maybe 6% per year goes up in value.

But if you live in a \$100,000 house or a \$200,000 house, if you live someplace like LeMay or someplace like the Hazelwood School District, what you've seen is that house skyrocketing in value. The typical 100 to \$200,000 house goes up in value on a year over year basis, double or more percent compared to the mansion in Clayton or Ladue. So why is that? It's obviously happening because we aren't building and making enough houses for normal people with normal incomes in this region.

And you can see it by looking at the home builders numbers, right? If you wanna buy something that is newly constructed and that costs 300 and something thousand dollars, you can't find that in St. Louis County. You're probably gonna have to go to a green field out in St. Charles County or Jefferson County. This is a real concern.

Look, it's great news if you're the homeowner, right? If you own one of those fixer uppers in LeMay that someday someone's gonna flip, congratulations, your biggest investment is worth a lot of money. But if you're 24 years old and you're thinking about the day when you make that first big purchase, you think about your piece of the American dream, that's getting more and more out of reach in this region and nationwide. It's just a huge problem.

And so yes, the county does have a role to play there.

[FENSKE] And so what would you do? I mean, you identified the problem very well. What's the solution?

[ZIMMERMAN] A couple of things.

Number one, cut bureaucratic red tape, make it easier to build, make it easier to do responsible development. There's too many permitting authorities in this town. It takes too long to get a building permit.

Everything costs more money and takes more time. And so, especially if you want something more affordable to be out there, you gotta pay serious attention to that. There's also, I think, opportunities in terms of the way the county planning department works.

I think we could learn some of the lessons of the so-called YIMBY movement from the coasts, which stands for Yes In My Backyard, making it easier to build things like accessory

dwelling units and create opportunities for people who wanna rent out part of their house. Anything like that that creates non-traditional housing opportunities is good. And then the other place that you really have to stick a pin in is public safety, safe neighborhoods.

If what you really want is some of the more challenged neighborhoods, especially in near North and South County, to have the kind of development you want, to have middle-class houses being built there, people gotta wanna live there. And for people to wanna live there, you need the school district going in the right direction, you need jobs, and you need owner-occupants, which is what helps to bring down the crime rate. So, I'm a big fan of this relatively new county land bank idea, building on some of the success that you've seen in the city, trying to turn around problem properties and find a way for responsible owners to be there again.

[FENSKE] So, you mentioned the YIMBY movement. It feels like the NIMBYs are kind of having a moment right now when it comes to multifamily housing. We've seen some serious pushback on apartment projects, including in St. Louis County, not just in St. Charles County.

Do you think the region needs more apartments as a pathway for younger people, lower-income people, to try to get into good neighborhoods?

[ZIMMERMAN] I think the region needs everything, right? The answer to this is no one thing, and there are many suburban communities in St. Louis County that are very proud of being single-family home kind of places, and that's fine, and that's part of why we have different constituencies that are different things to different people. So, let me be clear that I'm not taking a position here on some of that hot-button stuff, right? We're sitting in this beautiful library around the corner from a very contentious proposal over whether to build apartments in the floodplain and the old quarry site. I have no idea whether it's a good or a bad idea to put up those apartments.

That's for the Ladue Planning Commission to answer, but what I will say is that we need more creative thinking, we need more housing, and we need for the county planning department, where it's the county's responsibility, to adopt a more flexible and nimble mindset.

[FENSKE] So, in terms of these moratoriums on multifamily housing that you're seeing a lot of communities adopt, is that something that you would support for St. Louis County?

[ZIMMERMAN] I'm generally not a big fan of one-size-fits-all things like that. I think you wanna make decisions on a case-by-case basis about what's best for the community.

[FENSKE] So, the senior tax freeze. This has saved seniors in the county millions of dollars, but school districts have complained that this has dealt some big blows to their budget, that it's only gonna get worse over time. Do you support the continuance of that program?

[ZIMMERMAN] You know, if I were designing it from scratch, there's things I would do differently.

[FENSKE] Like what?

[ZIMMERMAN] Well, like the fact that I think that that program ought to exist to help make sure that folks on a fixed income who genuinely struggle to stay in their house have the help that they need to do it. You know, I proposed, when I was back in the legislature, I proposed public policy reforms like a version of what the state of Oregon did to help keep seniors in their homes. Where I think St. Louis County went a little bit astray here is not putting any income limit on the very high end.

You know, my parents live in a very nice home in Clayton, and I mean no disrespect to mom and dad here, right? But they qualify for the senior tax freeze, and because they have an extra few bucks in the bank courtesy of that tax freeze, you know, that pays for a nice restaurant meal or two for them on a monthly or yearly basis. But it's not the difference between whether they can afford to stay in their house or not. So like, sorry mom and dad, but I just think that maybe this should have been more targeted at people who need the help the most.

[FENSKE] So you'd take away mom and dad's tax break, but do you think you would work proactively to put in some sort of means testing on that program?

[ZIMMERMAN] Well, look, that's ultimately a question for the council and not the executive. The council structured this the way that they did. As the executive, it's my job to implement fairly whatever they put into place.

And my concern about the senior tax freeze is that there was somewhat haphazard implementation, the communication hasn't been great, goes back to some of those computer challenges I talked about at the Department of Revenue. At the end of the day, regardless of what I think about the means testing, the law is the law. And the job of the administration is to implement it and to get it done right, and to make sure that everybody who can benefit has a fair opportunity to take advantage.

And yes, I realize that there are some school districts and some fire departments who if you, the more you run the program better, that probably means they lose some money. But that's a public policy question. That's a question for the council.

That's a question for your school board and a question for the state legislature. The job you elect the county executive to do is to make the trains run on time. And that's what I intend to do.

[FENSKE] So this might be a policy question as well, but there's certainly areas of North County that have fallen behind what's happening in West County. Would you support additional incentives for development there or tax breaks for companies that locate there?

[ZIMMERMAN] Look, I think you always wanna target your development incentives at the places that need help. And this region has a bad history of throwing lots and lots of public money at stuff like we should build the Walmart on this side of the line instead of that side of the line so that I can get sales tax revenue on this side and not on that side.

That's crazy. That's fighting over slices of the pie. When you spend an incentive dollar, you should be spending it to grow the pie, to get in more than what you're throwing out.

If you don't do it that way, you're just doing corporate welfare. So yeah, look, there's historic disinvestment, particularly in North County, but also parts of South County. And there's a history of redlining and where they chose to build the interstates in the 1950s and beyond.

We can't ignore that. We can't pretend that that doesn't exist. When you look at a really challenged place like Kinloch or Castle Point, that didn't happen by accident.

It happened as a consequence of policy decisions. So yeah, I think the county has a responsibility to think about what policy decisions can help turn that around.

[FENSKE] You've also talked about with that senior tax freeze that it is gonna have that impact on school districts.

What can be done to ease the tax burden for not just seniors, but also for county residents of all ages who are now saying, oh, the school districts are taking a hit. I'm also not getting any sort of break on my smaller house.

[ZIMMERMAN] Right, every time you hand one person a tax break, what you're really doing is saying that everybody else will probably pay a little bit more.

At the end of the day, there's no free lunch. So a couple of things there. First of all, the county as a whole must take the same position that I've always taken as assessor, which is no freebies for the big boys.

You have probably seen big corporate tax representatives picking a fight with me, and in one case doing it through the mouth of one of my opponents, trying to say that we should roll over and go away and let them have their millions of dollars in tax savings. Well, the moment the county goes down that road, what you're really doing is saying, raise everybody else's bill. And I won't do that on my watch.

And whoever the next county assessor is, I bloody well hope that they take the same position. More broadly, the number one thing that we could do to not increase the tax burden on the people of St. Louis County is to vote down the incredibly foolish everything tax proposal that's on the August ballot. There is a proposal to abolish the state income tax and replace it with hefty increases on sales taxes, sales taxes on services, and potentially property taxes as well.

I think that would hit working people and middle-income people and most every normal person in St. Louis County really, really, really hard in exchange for an income tax break that would benefit a select few much more than everybody else. So to me, that's the most urgent priority.

[FENSKE] So our fourth agenda item, this is infrastructure.

County resident Bob Watson told us, quote, I am surprised to see roads that are in need of repair, Big Bend, Hanley, and Laclede Station. Stretches of all three roads are rated as poor by the county's own system. Those aren't the only ones.

What needs to happen to fix that?

[ZIMMERMAN] I'm open to any possible solution that increases government efficiency so that every dollar you spend on public works to the maximum extent possible is going to paving the roads and filling the potholes. And you'll recall that when you asked me about regionalism earlier in this conversation, I said to you that that's the real test for any of these proposals is what does it do for our potholes and what does it do for our parks? Filling a pothole isn't free. Repaving a street isn't free.

And of course, the state of Missouri has a famously low gas tax. And so state dollars for transportation are never what you want them to be. So part of it is making sure that the county fights for its fair share of those resources.

Too often in the state of Missouri, rural interests dominate. And I saw this every day when I was there in the legislature. And so I come back a little bit to the political squabbling.

When folks here can't agree with one another on regional priorities, and when Democrats and Republicans can't talk to each other and figure out a way to come to Jefferson City with the same three set of requests for the whole region, there's a reason why so much transportation money goes to fulfill promises to build ever more four-lane roads to rural communities and not here where it's needed more. And the other thing I'll put a pin in there is we need to do a better job of working with our peers in Kansas City, in Jackson County, the other big jurisdiction in this state. It's easy to think that that's a different city, you know, hundreds of miles away.

They have different needs than us. They have the same needs. And the same need is to make sure that your tax dollars that flow to Jefferson City flow back to urban and suburban communities in a fair way, and that our pockets don't get picked just to fund rural priorities because rural interests are more aligned in Jefferson City.

[FENSKE] So the advocacy group Safer Streets for the St. Louis region, they say that in 2024 alone, the cost of traffic accidents in the county exceeded \$900 million. One possible solution you hear a lot of people talking about is more traffic calming infrastructure, things like bump outs and medians. But as we've seen Clarkson Road and Chesterfield, those are not always popular.

Would you support more traffic calming infrastructure in the county?

[ZIMMERMAN] I come back to what I said before about the regionalism stuff, right? Look at what happened in the city of St. Louis. There are some of those projects that they've done very successfully and others that have had a lot of neighborhood pushback. And what happened on Clarkson Road is instructive.

When you try to shove something down people's throats, when you don't consult with the community, you get bad results. So if you think something is good, if you think something gives the community a better deal, safer streets and the kind of place that you'd wanna live, why don't you talk to the people who live there? Why don't you sell them the product

rather than just tell them it's good for them and then be surprised when they get mad as hell?

[FENSKE] Do you think the current MetroLink and MetroBus services in St. Louis County are adequate?

[ZIMMERMAN] No. I am a big fan of transit-oriented development.

I think the evidence from other cities around the country is that if you build it, they come. Years ago, the county missed out on MetroLink expansion because of political infighting. It was between Steve Stenger and the city of St. Louis.

Steve didn't like that he didn't have enough control over the plan. He wanted something that more parochially suited his needs and wouldn't cooperate with the then mayor of the city. That was such foolishness.

When you give up federal resources, matching funds and things like that that could really benefit this region, boy, that's penny-wise and pound-foolish. And we've made our share of transit mistakes, right? No one wants to go back down the road of the loop trolley one more time.

[FENSKE] Yes.

[ZIMMERMAN] But again, I think that if policymakers work with each other constructively, we can get what we need, which is better bus and train service.

[FENSKE] So what would you do to do that? I mean, I feel like Bi-State is saying we're doing the best we can with the money we have. Do you think that's true?

[ZIMMERMAN] Well, some of it comes back to Jeff City, right? The state, and in particular, the State Transportation Department has never provided as much money for transit as they should.

And they have various cockamamie legal explanations, which in my view as a lawyer, don't really pass muster. And so, yeah, the region needs to come together and fight. And when you talk about transit routes that connect South and North County, for example, there's some united interests there, but it requires Democrats and Republicans to read out of the same hymn book.

And that's a tricky beast.

[FENSKE] So the city is hopefully moving forward with bus rapid transit. They've taken some steps even in the last week.

If the city is able to go ahead with that project, would you want to see it expand into the county? Like say maybe going to UMSL?

[ZIMMERMAN] I think bus rapid transit is potentially very interesting. I've seen lots of evidence of it working well in other cities. Kansas City's had some success with it.

You know, Chicago has had some places where traditional train lines don't work, and so they've done hybrid stuff. Boston did something called the Silver Line that let them expand their system. If you can get me a mile of something that feels like track, but costs a lot less money than track, and then in return, I can get you more miles and more people able to get to work on time, I'm real interested in that, right? Open-minded.

I don't come in with a strong predisposition about what's right and what's wrong. But like we said before, if you can save a few bucks and get better public services, you ought to be interested in that.

[FENSKE] So we're now at our fifth and final agenda item.

We've made it through the hard part, I know. And this is more forward-looking. We're talking about emerging technologies.

These are a bunch of things that came up every time we talked to people and we started realizing, this is what they have in common. This all has to do with the technology that's kind of on the cutting edge here. Data centers.

[ZIMMERMAN] Sure.

[FENSKE] Do you think the county should allow data centers to be built? And I'm not just talking about the smaller ones that are here now in the city, for example. I'm talking about the mega-sized ones.

[ZIMMERMAN] We have smaller ones already. The ones that get public attention are these hyperscale proposals. And I think it is instructive to look at the difference between places like Festus, where people seem to have come out of the woodwork mad as hell, feeling like they weren't consulted, and doing what they need to do to get these things stopped, versus, you know, an interesting example is the one that Google did, I believe in Montgomery County, if I'm remembering correct, in rural Missouri, where they didn't encounter that kind of community pushback.

So some of it is about what I was saying before, that if you think something is good for the community, be prepared to tell people why it's good and be prepared to answer tough questions. If you won't do that, if you just say, this is good for you, take your medicine, I think we've learned in Festus what will happen there. So for me, I have a couple of ironclad principles that I think any policymaker should take into account when you answer this kind of question, which is, number one, will it raise the water rates? Number two, will it raise the electric bill? Number three, will it create a nuisance through noise or any form of pollution or anything else that will decrease people's quality of life? If the answer to any of those three questions is yes, then this thing's probably a bad deal, and you should expect people to be against it, and you should not pull the wool over people's eyes.

And I think that the developers are ahead of the policymakers here, and the policymakers need to get up to speed quickly. And then the other thing that I always like to say, I have a little mnemonic device that is just my personal opinion here, and that's the Beyonce principle. The Beyonce principle, Beyonce is a little shorthand for bring your own clean

energy, right? If you can do Beyonce, right, if you can show up with your own clean energy so that you are solving the problem rather than asking people to solve it for you, like what Google tries to do with these things, as opposed to some of the other developers, I think that gives you a pretty good mindset into what kind of development you're looking at.

[FENSKE] So in the city, their police board recently signed off on a proposal to use drones as first responders. St. Charles County's doing the same thing. There's kind of a hole between those two places.

Would you like to see St. Louis County get in on a program like that?

[ZIMMERMAN] I think about drones the same way I think about AI and all these other new technologies, which is we should have a hefty dose of caution and skepticism. I'm not against the future. I think if we want this region to compete nationwide, we need to be open to whatever is coming next.

And we need to be open-minded about what that means. But AI and its affiliated stuff is also ahead of the policymakers. And if you take control away from the people and tell them this technology is good for you, whether you like it or not, the people are gonna react in very predictable ways and say, uh-uh, that's not okay.

And so I've periodically been pitched proposals as assessor about how we could get drones to fly over your house and look at your house and get a better view of what your house looks like than maybe a human being on the street. As you can imagine, I have not been quick to say yes to those proposals because I think it would scare the heck out of people. I think they would wanna know what you're doing.

But by the same token, there have been satellites in the sky for decades. Google Maps is a thing. Google Earth is a thing.

And so if you want to appeal your property value and you come in to say, hey, you jerks think my house is worth more than it really is, well, the first thing we're gonna do is call up a picture of your house, right? And we have paid for good technology to have the best possible overhead picture from satellites and airplanes that you can get, right? So that's good and it's useful technology and people are used to it and people are comfortable with it. But yeah, drones buzzing around to tell you what your house is worth, I can tell from the look on your face, it gives you the ooky gookies, right?

[FENSKE] It does a little bit, yeah.

[ZIMMERMAN] So my first reaction when you talk about police drones is gives me the ooky gookies a little bit.

It feels a little like 1984, but is it the technology of the future? Maybe, does it need to be studied? Maybe, but I would suggest a whole lot of community consultation.

[FENSKE] So you mentioned artificial intelligence. As you say, this is here, the policy hasn't really caught up with it.

I'm wondering about your personal use, like would you use AI in your administration?

[ZIMMERMAN] In a limited way where real human beings control what you're doing. If you can save time and save money, not a bad idea. So let me give you an example in my current job where we don't use AI and where I think it would be foolish to do it is valuation decisions, right? You don't want the all powerful computer in the sky being the one to tell you what your house is worth.

You want a human being to look at that property and do what an appraiser does. But what about when you file a complicated legal description of a deed because you are transferring half of the property to your niece in a sale between related parties? So people don't think about this because it's not sexy, but my office has to do those deed transfers. My office has to make sure that the legal description matches, that if you say 40 paces to the north and 80 paces to the west, that that matches the survey.

And when a human being reviews that document and then does the data entry and types it in, they make mistakes. My best staff probably have a one to 2% error rate. So we have found that the AI has a lower error rate because it can read the legal description and immediately figure out if it's off from the actual map in the parcel fabric.

So we have human beings supervise it and human beings check its work, but we have actually found that the human beings do a better job on that kind of stuff where you don't ever see what's going on in the wheels. All you want is for the job to be done right. But you would get hopping mad at me if you wanted to appeal your property value, if you wanted to talk to the assessor's office and say, you guys say we have three bathrooms, but really we only have two.

And I said, great, talk to the chatbot. If I do that, you'll throw me out of office the next month and you should. I think that's a pretty good mental model for the right and the wrong way to think about it.

[FENSKE] So at the same time that people are finding ways to use AI, a bunch of jobs could be lost to AI. This is something that could really affect the county workforce. How will you work to preserve jobs in the region that are vulnerable to AI disruption or to help people get ready for the next thing?

[ZIMMERMAN] Yeah, this could very well be the next industrial revolution and past technological advances and also a good bad example here is the outsourcing of manufacturing work to Mexico and later to China.

We were sold this bill of goods that this was gonna be great for the economy and it did probably make our steel and our cars cheaper. But yeah, a whole lot of people lost their jobs and no one was ready to really provide the training or the help that was needed to actually protect Americans and people in this community in particular, right? When the car plants left, when fill-in-the-blank other manufacturing went away. Instead, we got vague promises and then we got backlash and that's part of why Donald Trump is our president now.

So we can't let that happen again. And this one could be worse because this time they're coming for the jobs of people like me. I'm a lawyer by training, right? And there's stuff like this that says that it's lawyers and CPAs and folks like that who could be put out of a job.

If that's what's coming around the corner, this region has to be ready. We have to be forward thinking and we have to think about what will the good jobs of the future be? And just like in retrospect, the state spent too much money throwing it at Ford, begging them to keep the plant in Hazelwood open for one more year. Well, we threw a lot of tax dollars at them and one more year was gone and they still closed the plant, right? So you have limited resources, spending them trying to get ahead of it and make sure that this region is well-positioned to compete for the jobs of the future.

That's what you gotta do.

[FENSKE] And how do you do that though? I mean, that's, you know, is this a matter of the county needing to study it?

[ZIMMERMAN] I think you gotta work in consultation with people outside of government. This is bigger than government.

The folks at Greater St. Louis, the folks at the Regional Business Council, they've got a big stake in this too and they know more than I do. They know what's gonna happen years down the road. They know which divisions are most vulnerable to layoffs down the road.

You gotta get them to be forthright about that so that you can address the plan together and figure out where we need to be stronger.

[FENSKE] All right, well, you have hit the end of our agenda here today. I wanna thank you for answering all our questions and yeah, letting us pick your brain.

[ZIMMERMAN] Delighted to do it. Thank you. Thank you very much.