

Race For County Exec: Brian Williams Interview

[FENSKE] So We're here today for the citizens agenda the citizens agenda And we've talked to voters and residents of the county about what's most important to them And we ended up compiling a list of five things based on what they told us The first one the one we heard from so many people is the importance of growing the region, you know The population has stagnated.

What's one thing you do as County executive to make St. Louis County more attractive to new residents and also to businesses.

[WILLIAMS] Well first Sarah I want to thank you for your time as well as Nine PBS and St. Louis magazine for hosting this but you know, it's simple when I think about our region It's about some of the things we've done already as a state senator I was proud to secure funding for engineering program for the University of Missouri St. Louis with Boeing coming back here with 15,000 jobs. That's going to allow us to attract talent and also create opportunities for people that are already here That's one opportunity for population growth. I also think about the fact that our region has to also Embrace the fact that we are a destination we sit in the middle of the country meaning you can get anywhere in the day so and I think folks recognize that Missouri and in St.

Louis in particular is a place of convenience and not an inconvenience or flyover city I think we find people really Becoming attracted to our region and recognizing we have a lot to give and that's before you even talk about the art scene The fact that we have Forest Park and so many free amenities that I believe once folks get here for a reason They'll have all the reason to stay and most importantly the people that are already here feel seen and heard

[FENSKE] So we've had all those things right this location is the one constant and we have these great amenities and yet This population is not growing. What do you think the problem is there?

[WILLIAMS] Well, I think there's a couple things one We have leadership that that doesn't tell our story well. You know, I think about from my perspective I've seen St.

Louis as an outside Person where we've worked hard to deliver for St. Louis County, but we see the government doesn't feel close to people It doesn't feel modern. It doesn't Talk about regional opportunities.

It feels as if the city and the county are two different worlds I think having more collaboration The next county executive would be in this imperative that they have a good working relationship with the mayor of the city of St. Louis and there's collaborative opportunities for people to not feel as if it's a Divided or a stagnant city and just to speak to my own personal opinion It has to be a region that believes in diversity and believes that everyone regardless of their background This is a place that they can call home and not just home for a few people

[FENSKE] So there has been a lot of talk about maybe some sort of form of government Consolidation could be an answer that could help get us out of the doldrums here. Would you support giving serious consideration? To combining the city in the county.

[WILLIAMS] Well, I think first my goal would be making sure the county is Cleaning up its own home first. we have a budget deficit, which I think is important to address and we've already started that process by solidifying 51 million dollars in a hotel motel tax that I carried legislation for due to the merger of the Convention Center board and the Regional Sports Authority So that's going to eliminate the budget deficit before I get there, but I think that's important. I also believe Identifying services that we could potentially Combine and partner in public safety will be a good one to start with and then give our County in particular in our region really kind of an on-ramp to see what the possibilities are and whether or not it impacts their Quality of life.

[FENSKE] What about the idea of the city re-entering the county as just one of the 80 something municipalities in it Do you support that?

[WILLIAMS] I think once you have a conversation, you know, look I represent a region that has 46 municipalities and I work close with local mayors and council people and harder people and One thing I recognized is me having that relationship Working close with them listening to them hearing what community members feel That'll be where I would start before I have any conversations about a merger, but I will say it does sound nice to be 1.2 or 3 million then You know nine hundred thousand and two hundred and something thousand So I think that that data would look good for us from a national and resource perspective But right now I think it's about making sure that we get all of our leadership and most importantly the region rolling in the same Direction first.

[FENSKE] So with all those municipalities, they're already part of st. Louis County It sounds like you're familiar with trying to work with all these different personalities and the people that they represent How would you as County Executive Get 80-something municipalities on the same page working with each other instead of competing with each other?

[WILLIAMS] As I said before, you know, we have 46 municipalities in the Senate District I represent now I represent some of the wealthier communities like Ladue and Olivette some parts of Clayton and then I go north through communities like Ferguson where I grew up and In parts of North St. Louis County Hazelwood Florissant, and they're all different They're not monolithic and I've learned how to govern And really own the fact that I'm a regional leader and taking that regional approach Has allowed me to understand a lot of challenges and disparities that impact our region but most importantly be able to get people rowing in the same direction and collaborating around issues that help the people that need it the most and Recognize that it's what's good for one community is good for our entire region including the city of st.

Louis So that approach has allowed me to build really meaningful relationships and that's something I anticipate continuing to do as County Executive

[FENSKE] So all too often it seems like regional leaders prioritize their own parochial power rather than doing what's best for the region what can you point to in your past where

you've You know worked for the region as opposed to what's best for you or your individual freedom.

[WILLIAMS] Absolutely, so I've done it my entire career when I was elected to the Missouri Senate again, I recognized that I was sent there to be a regional leader not a leader for one particular community and that's what allowed me to be able to Focus on getting funding to demolish Jamestown Mall, which had been an eyesore in North st Louis County for over a decade I think about the regional police facility where my office secured \$23 million in federal money from the state to match money at the county level for a 46 million dollar complex for a precinct to in Maryland Heights, which we just had a ribbon-cutting ceremony It's a beautiful facility named after a fallen officer by the name of Antonio Valentine. Or I think about the fact that we've been able to secure an engineering program for UMSL Where that's the only four-year public research institution in St. Louis that now has a program to attract talent But also provide an affordable quality education for individuals that want to go into that profession Those are just some tangible examples that I've been able to do in a minority party Convincing my colleagues in Jefferson City that our region makes up 45% of the GDP Meaning we drive the economy for the entire state of Missouri and anytime we invest in our workforce We address blighted areas. We create opportunities of collaboration.

It only makes our entire state better

[FENSKE] So we talked about the desire to grow the region when that hasn't been happening. The region is also getting older What can county government do to encourage young people to stay here or encourage young people to move here from elsewhere?

[WILLIAMS] Well, I think I have a decent understanding of that you know, I believe that it's going to be imperative that st. Louis becomes a Destination that makes everyone feel seen and heard and when I think about again me representing a region that's not monolithic Meaning, you know, I understand what it's like to be a first-time homeowner and you're looking at the fact of how do I afford To live in St.

Louis County. How do I address things around? Increasing costs of gas and groceries and property taxes and then I think about the fact that we live in a region where folks to some extent don't believe there's job opportunities or they can grow and live in a community that provides them a Vibrant social life and they go into some of the most expensive rents in the country Even if they can't afford it just to be able to have a quality of life They believe is inclusive to who they think they should be So it's going to be imperative the county executive embrace the arts embrace again regional collaboration and make sure st. Louis County first is an affordable place, especially for first-time homeowners And I can clearly our seniors to be able to stay in their homes, even though they are aging

[FENSKE] So affordability is a whole agenda item, so we'll get to that one in a minute but our second agenda item That's functional government.

This is something that came up time and again Here's a quote from one of the st. Louis County's residents. The County Council needs to stop their infighting What will you do early

in your administration to make sure that the county government isn't defined by dysfunction?

[WILLIAMS] Well, I think it's important to note what I've done already in my career.

I went to Jefferson City again as a person in a minority party and I had to convince individuals who had no inherent reason to be supportive to St. Louis a majority of them did not live here to think that I've been able to do that again among 34 and roughly a hundred and sixty three members in the legislature, what would I give to do that among seven of my colleagues from the same County that ultimately should be focused on growing our region making sure it's safe making sure we're creating job opportunities and a political nonpartisan government. So I feel very confident and I believe that that would be a natural transition and it'll be something that I would be uniquely equipped for considering how much success I found in Jefferson City

[FENSKE] So you think you could just show up and just by nature of not being Sam Page like that that would solve the problem Or are there some specific things you need to do?

[WILLIAMS] Oh, there's specific things You know, I think about Jamestown mall. I worked close with councilwoman Shalonda Webb to get the matching money I worked with members of the council to get matching funds for the police facility that we built in Maryland Heights I worked close with Councilwoman Davis to get 80 million dollars for um, so the engineering program and then consolidating their south campus To create a campus of the future Which is going to allow that part of the region to have a patient health care facility To be able to demolish old buildings that can create green space for students to live on campus and not view it as a commuter University I've already have worked with members of the council to identify tangible opportunities to continue to support St. Louis County being not only a region that that's growing and thriving But recognizing it's the largest county in the state and it should feel like it

[FENSKE] So the county has had a real budget crunch lately Revenue is stagnant costs for everything seemed to be going up federal funds are lower than they'd previously been How do you plan to keep providing basic services and an acceptable level in light of those budget challenges?

[WILLIAMS] well, the first thing is address the budget deficit and As I stated before I was proud to redirect 51 million dollars back to county taxpayers Which go to general revenue is sitting on the governor's desk that I carried in the legislature this past April Which is now going to eliminate the 41 million dollar budget deficit and then that's going to start a conversation on how do we modernize Our government?

How do we sophisticate county government to be a good steward of taxpayer dollars? as a senior member of the Appropriations Committee And the state level I've been proud to balance a budget with a record surplus for the past several years And even with a tight budget Budget cycle this year as a senior member of that committee I was proud to be able to balance the budget and still be able to deliver things for St. Louis That's something I've been proud of and I again I believe has me uniquely equipped to be able to go into this role

and understand the importance of being a good steward of taxpayer Dollars, but most importantly balancing a strong budget

[FENSKE] So one of the specific services that the county has been trying to provide that has just it's been beleaguered is the animal shelter Here's what we heard from one county resident quote 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 and more? What would you do about the animal shelter?

[WILLIAMS] Well first I want to set the stage as county executive It's gonna be imperative that I have the ability to attract the best and the brightest individuals that we can find in county government Ideally folks who could be doing anything else in the world But they feel a desire to serve their community and make their local government better which impacts us in so many important ways when it comes to the animal shelter, it's been something that's been very challenging as someone who's a fan and and lover of animals in particular furry ones I think it's imperative that we do a strategic plan identify what partnerships are out there Clearly, I've worked close with the APA and in different organizations that are now building a new facility in st Louis County where we can create a regional approach to protect our animals But again, that'll be a priority of mine ensuring that that is a safe quality Facility for our animals and for our residents to trust that they're safe And even at the state level having that relationship with the department's as a state senator We can ensure that we work with the department's at the state level to ensure that we're in compliance and know exactly what we Need to do to maintain that moving forward

[FENSKE] So the Lawrence K Roos building in downtown Clayton that has been another just it feels like a disaster at this point What would you do with that building?

[WILLIAMS] first I would not have waited until a year before the The last deadline that they have to be out of that facility, which is at the end of 2027 So I'm a little bit perplexed that any county elected official in any office hasn't taken their own initiative and say hey What are we going to do to make sure our employees and most importantly the county seat is not in jeopardy or potentially been unhoused I've noticed that in Clayton is very much high in Valuable real estate.

I'm convinced that the Lawrence Roos building in that property is valuable I think we should look into talking to really smart people who understand development who understands real estate transactions Maybe we can sell that land in that building and there is a parking lot across the street that I'm sure people may or may not have paid to park on that. We can look into potentially building a new building. But again Whatever we do it needs to be in the interest of good steward of taxpayer dollars Most importantly what's best to keep our employees safe in an equality environment to work in for morale and then also Recognizing we do have to maintain the county seat in the city of Clayton when it comes to the council in the county executive meeting So that's gonna have to stay at the center of that as well, but I'm very much Concerned about it and I'm looking forward to talking with the city of Clayton and understanding what we can do to resolve that

[FENSKE] So you're committed to Clayton You would not want to see any more permanent move away from there Even if there has to be a temporary move while the buildings being worked on

[WILLIAMS] it's gonna be important to acknowledge the Charter says that we have to maintain the county seat in the city of Clayton and Unless there's a change in the Charter I'm just gonna follow by the rules of the Charter and and hopefully be able to work out something That's a good steward of taxpayer dollars.

[FENSKE] So that building it sounds like you might be willing to sell that building if you could figure out an alternative But it's just as uninviting on the inside as it is on the outside if the county government stays in that building What would you do to make it more? Accessible and make county government more transparent to people who are just coming to stop by for a meeting or coming to deal with county Offices,

[WILLIAMS] you know, they're simple things I remember walking in the facility not too long ago and to think that the lights are dim There's something about just having bright lights that are inviting The simple fact that my my aunt who went to pay a bill for My grandfather who's 96 the office is closed at 3 p.m. She got there at 3 15 p.m Knocking on the door and to think right now to get access to county services If you don't have a schedule that allows you to go between 8 a.m. And 3 p.m Then you pretty much are out of luck. So one making sure they're open at hours that allows Everyday residents to be able to utilize the services, but I think also Recognizing that we should have a building that that's modern. We should have a building that's energy efficient We should have a building that allows access to parking.

We should be handicap accessible to where disabled Residents should be able to get in pretty easily, which I'm not sure if that's the case today And most importantly we need to have a building that that allows people to go in and navigate pretty easily When I walk in I have no idea where to go And and I think we need to make that building feel close to its residents And and that should be the cadence of county government because what I've seen is most people have no idea what county government What they do and most folks are pretty agnostic to it and that's very concerning For anybody in the county considering with the largest county in the state and we drive the economy for the state Mm-hmm.

[FENSKE] So our third agenda item as you touched on earlier, this is the issue of affordability How would you make sure housing is available for lower and middle-income st. Louis residents? Do you think county government should play a role in ensuring that they're able to get? Housing that's built affordably

[WILLIAMS] 100% You know, I think about my mom who's just 19 years older than me and I know it was challenging for her Unfortunately, I had grandparents who stepped in and played a significant role in helping our family dynamic and that became my village And played a significant role in why I am who I am today when I think about governing I think about how does the the single mother like mine? Manage to raise her children and government is is a support to her if she needs it.

I think about Many families on fixed income seniors on fixed income and to think that we have rising costs But income isn't increasing with that. We have rising Property taxes and

folks are trying to stay in the investment that they built And I think about the fact that we have the cost of so many things at the federal level Where we have to insulate our government locally to not be impacted by the cuts of Medicaid and Medicare The fact that gas and groceries are through the roof We have to be sensitive to that and and that's a permanent interest of mine So I will be committed to ensuring that there's access to housing. We're creating a pathway to home ownership That's affordable And lastly, we're creating a workforce regardless If you want to go to college you can get the training and not become financially insecure in the process

[FENSKE] So what's one thing you do to make sure that the county has more affordable housing?

[WILLIAMS] Yeah, absolutely.

We address things like we did in the city of Kinloch, which is one of the oldest black cities in America We got funding to address illegal dumping and now we're revitalizing that community And hope to be able to bring it back to what it was in the past and they can have housing I think about demolishing Jamestown mall that land with um a competent port authority could look at opportunities That's led by the community to create opportunities of density. And I also think about the fact that as someone who um, Recognizes how difficult it is to become a homeowner We need to start figuring out how to have a zoning and planning process on the county level to create Opportunities to build more homes in st Louis county because st Charles county and other counties are growing because they have a process That allows home builders to be able to go through and get homes on the market Which allows there to be more inventory and you pair that with opportunities and an increase in wages and in lower um cost Creates an avenue I believe for st Louis county to be an affordable destination and that will be a priority for me

[FENSKE] Do you think right now we make it too hard for people to build new housing?

[WILLIAMS] Oh 110%. I think right now county government has created so much red tape.

It has become A very concerning level of inept bureaucracy across the board And I think it's going to be imperative that the next st Louis county executive place accountability measures across the board not just On the county executive's office in the council, but other county elected officials to ensure that they're running efficient offices They're not raising costs on individuals We're not seeing affordability continue to be an issue in our region And most importantly we're we're making government feel close to people and when government feels close to people They feel seen they feel heard and it goes back to so many communities that I represent today That have just said we want government to be simple and when we need to get access to government We don't want to feel like it's hard and right now it feels extremely challenging.

[FENSKE] So you mentioned other elected officials Um, this is something that it would be more complicated for the county executive to control Versus the uh, the bureaucracy that reports to the county executive. Can you give us some specifics on what? What elected offices needs need reform and how you would deal with that?

[WILLIAMS] One thing we started to work on this year the legislature recognized with the increase of cost and affordability being a big issue nationwide We started addressing things around property tax reform.

So our office, uh sponsored and I filed legislation That allowed us to ensure that your property tax bill comes on time. Your evaluation is clear You can see what it was in previous years. We also work with the state tax commission to identify parcels that may have been um wrongfully assessed And then making sure that we don't create a process where people are either been overcharged or again They're receiving a property tax bill that exceeds the cost of their home or potentially put them in a position where they're Losing stability and something that they've invested in in pretty much.

Um, Created the stability that they wanted to see for their for their future And one thing I know in the communities that I represent your home is the pathway to generational wealth That is usually the keystone to a lot of families is home ownership And if you don't have stability in home ownership, then I don't know where we get it So focusing on property tax reform making sure that people are getting the bills on time making sure they're not convoluted making sure That they are accurate is something that's going to be really important that we do from a county government perspective but also from other elected offices

[FENSKE] You talked about wanting to make it easier for people to build at the same time There's been some big pushback on multi-family projects. People don't necessarily want more of those Um, do you think the region needs more apartments as a pathway for younger families or people who are unlimited incomes in order to be In places with good schools or the communities they want to live in?

[WILLIAMS] I think we need to create a a county in a region where home ownership doesn't feel like a burden And right now we have a population Of residents who believe that it is more challenging To become a home owner and more daunting to become a home owner and too expensive to become a home owner So they prefer to rent but we have to also note any time There's an increase in taxes or an increase in cost of living and your income's not increasing that still impacts rents also So we have to one Promote home ownership. We have to create pathways for people to go into careers that allow them to make a quality and not just livable But quality wage that can allow them to afford home ownership And then again if they choose to live in apartments, then we can respect that too But I don't think it's a apartment versus home ownership issue I think it's about promoting home ownership and creating a pathway for people to afford to be able to do it

[FENSKE] So would you support a moratorium on multi-family housing that some communities are contemplating?

[WILLIAMS] I would say I don't think I have enough data to be able to make an informed decision at the moment However, I do recognize that there is a population of people who believe that living in st Louis county is too expensive and owning homes is it's very expensive and they can't afford it And we want to create avenues for home ownership.

We want to make sure that living in st Louis county is affordable and most importantly we want to promote it to the extent to where living in an apartment becomes a Second option instead of a first

[FENSKE] So you mentioned some property tax reform the senior tax freeze That has now saved seniors in the county millions of dollars At the same time school districts are complaining that it's dealt a real blow to their budget. Would you support the continuance of that program?

[WILLIAMS] I think it's important to note that I represent a region that has 11 school districts I have some of the top performing schools likely do then I have challenging schools like Normandy in Riverview Gardens So i've had a front row seat as a as a as a state regional leader The to see the challenges when it comes to education And i've become very committed to ensuring that there's access in every community and every zip code has quality Education and allow students to go and be productive and and most importantly gainfully employed individuals Considering the fact that the senior property tax freeze which I did sponsor I believe that seniors are on fixed incomes and I think about my 96 year old grandfather Who I enjoy the fact that he still has some independence and I want him to be able to keep that And in order to do that, we have to recognize that cost of rising in income is staying the same So in order for us to do that, I believe in the senior property tax freeze. However, I do believe the county has done a a a very Inadequate job implementing it And when you think that there has been areas in our county that are affluent that have gotten the freeze and some they're less affluent That has didn't even know that the program existed It's a very very big problem So I think i'm going to focus on ensuring that we're targeting areas of need And ensuring that the population of individuals who deserve the freezing could really benefit from it or getting access to it And then still at the same time not making that mutually exclusive to the fact that we need to Create more than one avenue of funding our schools and creating an equitable education system in st Louis county

[FENSKE] Do you think there should be means testing? Uh for the senior freeze so that if somebody is on a fixed income they would qualify But if someone's living in a million dollar house in Ladue, they're not necessarily getting that same freeze

[WILLIAMS] 100% and again representing a diverse Part of the region where I have communities that I serve every day That are living on a fixed income a lot of communities where seniors are or have very minimal means That is going to stay at the front of my mind And I think it's important that we make sure that government feels close to that population first and foremost That's something that's been important to me as a state senator and that'll be a priority as county executive

[FENSKE] Do you think more needs to be done to ease the tax burden for not just seniors but for county residents who are younger?

[WILLIAMS] I think that's something we definitely need to consider considering how difficult it is to become a homeowner in st.

Louis county You know, a lot of students are leaving and they've done everything, right? They have student loan debt. They have so many different Unforeseen overhead costs that is keeping them from even being eligible to be approved for a home loan That's something we need to think about and that's why I was proud to secure the engineering program for umsl Which creates an affordable pathway for students to go into what I believe is a meaningful career That's going to attract roughly 15,000 additional jobs to st Louis to be able to not only stay here but get an affordable education and then be on a pathway to make Really really good money or I think about the fact that i've built a career Working in the construction and design industry where we created a pathway for high school students and underemployed adults To be able to go into a pathway within the trades or get scholarship opportunities to become engineers or architects Those are just examples of workforce development opportunities to allow people to get meaningful careers But not become financially insecure in the process And that's going to be something that stays at the center of my mind and that's something that I witnessed growing up myself To a child of a single mom and I know there's so many other families in the county that can resonate with that

[FENSKE] So our fourth agenda item, uh is infrastructure we heard from county resident bob watson He said I am surprised to see roads that are in need of repair big bend hanley laclede station Stretches of all three of those roads are rated as poor by the county's own system and those weren't the only ones What needs to happen to fix that?

[WILLIAMS] I think it's a couple things one. We need to make sure the public understands what infrastructure means And I always remind people infrastructure is when you're standing at the end of your street and the lights are so dim on your block I can yell your name and you have no idea who's who's talking to you Infrastructure is when you almost find it safer to walk in the middle of the street because the sidewalks are facing the sky That's infrastructure and when the public understands what that word means and and I can tell you I'm, i'm completely fine with raising my hand and saying hey tell me what that word means So I can assure that we talk in plain english to our residents because they deserve that But to the infrastructure question about the roads i'm willing to to um I'm willing to go out on a limb and say that st.

Louis county has probably missed out on millions of federal dollars Because the department of transportation or just county government as a whole has not been adequately equipped to target grants To target federal money that we saw that was available through the Biden administration To take advantage of so many different grant programs that we've seen st Charles county and other counties take advantage of to fix our roads and as county executive I would make sure that we hire the best and the brightest individuals that can target opportunities for us to drive Not just resources back to st Louis county to fix the roads but for programs to help us address every facet of our residents quality of life

[FENSKE] So safer streets for the st. Louis region. They're an advocacy group They say that in 2024 alone the cost of traffic crashes in st.

Louis county exceeded 900 million dollars Now one possible solution you hear a lot of people talking about is traffic calming infrastructure. There's that word again Uh, but talking about things like medians and bump outs as we've seen in chesterfield with clerks and road

people living nearby Don't always like these kind of traffic calming infrastructure Uh, do you support more of that sort of thing more bump outs more medians?

[WILLIAMS] Well, I support more collaboration considering the fact as a state senator I've been proud to work close with departments including modot to ensure that we understand exactly what's happening every year I conduct a town hall With municipal and local leaders and the director of modot to talk about projects that are happening on our interstates and our corridors To ensure that there's more collaboration between the county and state and the federal government On top of that it's going to be imperative that we identify um smart people that can help us take advantage of Some of the best plans look at some road plans and and even look at some grids in other parts of the country that allowed us to not only have safe roads, but also have a a um An infrastructure that allows us to be able to get around safely and not have unnecessary medians or things that end up creating more Traffic and more accidents than actually easing more less congestion and more Productive traffic.

[FENSKE] So do you feel like some of the things we've done to try to deal with this issue? Maybe haven't been well engineered.

Is that what you're saying? We've executed poorly

[WILLIAMS] I can say day one is st. Louis county executive. We will be prepared to implement Not only a plan but some of the best and brightest people we can find that have seen things that have happened Not only in our region, but throughout the country to ensure that first we're protecting Motorists on the road and no one's getting hurt.

We're Getting on a pathway to ensure that there's less vehicular accidents And then we're also looking at a a road system that we're taking advantage of every funding opportunity We can to be able to adequately pay for the best Calming measures and not creating a nuisance or a burden for our county residents in the process

[FENSKE] So with metro link and metro bus, do you think the current level of services, uh are adequate in st Louis county

[WILLIAMS] well as someone who represent a region that has the most metro link stops including washu umsl in the airport That's been a priority for mine and i've been proud to secure funding That has been the largest investment in this region around mass transit So I work very close with by state in metro around a lot of the issues pertaining to metro bus in metro link a fun fact of my grandmother my my Dad's mom. She drove what they called the 41 lee route. So it was a really Prominent route in st.

Louis city and every summer I would sit In that first seat behind her and I remember just growing up as a kid how the metro bus was such a community Driven avenue where she knew everyone that was getting on She would wait a couple extra minutes to ensure someone that was coming late or a senior that needed to get on the bus That they were able to get and and uh accessible and and timely ride wherever they were going in our region So that's a foundation where I have very high regard for public transportation And I think we should be able to use it more and I think it should be one of the safest Avenues to get around our region. So I will be dedicated to working close with uh Continuing to work

close with with by state to ensure that um, the buses are coming on time It becomes a safe avenue and it becomes a convenient one So I am in favor of figuring out how that we ensure that public transportation Is more accessible and most importantly is convenient for everyone in this region regardless of their zip code

[FENSKE] So the city is taking some big steps forward to put a bus rapid transit Uh sort of go from north to south. Would you want to see it expand to the county? Maybe go to umsl? ,

[WILLIAMS]Well, it does go, well the metro link?

[FENSKE] Uh, no the bus rapid transit this would be a different line that they're going to build like along jefferson mostly and it would go up into Sort of at the edge of the city is where it would stop if they build it

[WILLIAMS] It sounds like a good idea But I would have to see some data and understand what it would cost I would like there to be a collaboration between the city and the county and even surrounding counties to collectively work to make that a reality but Creating accessibility when it comes to mass transit and public transportation is going to always be something I support Especially if it's getting students and clearly folks to work easier

[FENSKE] uh metro link has or metro, uh by state has been uh Doing this subsidized ride sharing app via metro and there's quite a bit of that that's happening in north county and some far parts of west county Uh, do you see that as a good solution? Would you like to see that expand for places that don't have that dedicated bus service?

[WILLIAMS] Absolutely You know, we've seen and even at the state level i've been proud to not only provide Funding towards mass transit, but that impacts a lot of services like call ride oats Which we know that we have a lot of residents seniors disabled, uh residents Some children that really depend on that to get around so i'm going to always be in support of creating accessibility, especially For our residents in need, uh that just can't get to a bus stop or a metro link stop So yes I think that's a service that we need to continue to provide And i'm committed to doing that and ensuring that we we keep that as an option for not just north st Louis county but residents throughout our entire county

[FENSKE] So you've made it through four of the agenda items. Uh, you're through the hard part. Uh, our fifth item is emerging technologies These were things that we found people bringing up Um, i'm sure you won't be surprised to hear one of the big questions Do you think the county should allow data centers to be built?

[WILLIAMS] I think first, um as someone that's always been um On the front line of prioritizing our energy our water Our environment that's something that's a permanent interest for me.

However, I do recognize that Data centers have been around for two decades And we have to evaluate how do we create a community engagement piece of that where they're identifying Who the client is That client is forthcoming about what their intentions are in this community or this region And then most importantly the community feel at ease and believe that there's transparency in that process. If there's not transparency, that's going to

be concerning for me because I believe St. Louis County should be a transparent, honest, dedicated government to its residents. And that's something that I'll keep at the center of my administration as I've done. Currently as a state senator, but again, it would just depend on the situation. I recognize that they've been around for some time. So I don't think it's unfair to say that we're going to ban them. But I will say that I'll never be in support of a data center I felt deprived our region of its energy, its water, um, contaminated our environment or wasn't transparent and disclosed who the provider or the client was.

[FENSKE] So when it comes to energy demands and water demands. Uh, what would you like to see the county do to make sure that one of these mega developments doesn't end up taking more. Uh, that would be good for the county.

[WILLIAMS] I think the county should be dedicated to taking care of its residents as we are today. And then if we do that first and that puts us in a position to be able to address any large developments of any kind, not just a data center and my commitment to modernizing government, making sure it feels close to people. That is transparent and most importantly as a leader, I'm talking in plain English about what government means for them. Because I believe there's been so many communities throughout the entire county that it has felt left out. Has believed that government does not work for them, they have no trust in their elected officials and county government has consistently been behind the curve in comparison to large counties throughout the country. And if we don't have leadership that say it that has a vision and most importantly has a record of delivering for our region. It has continued to stay stagnant and that's something that I want to change as county executive.

[FENSKE] So the city has inked a deal, uh, to bring on drones as first responders. Would you support the county doing the same thing?

[WILLIAMS] I support public safety and I've been proud to be supported by first responders and have their endorsement.

So my working relationship with public safety has been something long-standing and something I'm proud of. However, I would have to evaluate how that would impact the community and again, we like to look at data. We like to get community engagement and that's something that I would do before I make a decision. And as of today, I don't have that information, but I am proud of my relationship with first responders and have been proud to be endorsed by public safety organizations. And we'll make sure they're at the table but also prioritizing the community interest first.

[FENSKE] So if the county did bring in drones, um, how would you ensure that constituents still maintain their right to privacy?

[WILLIAMS] I think it's important to have town halls. Which I've been proud to have them and engage with the public around anything that I'm doing and then most importantly, uh, put law enforcement and first responders in the room to articulate with the public what they're doing. You know, it goes back to when I took the lead on police accountability. And that was simply because of the fact that I believed in reforms that the community should be able to trust law enforcement. But I also recognized that there were people like my uncle

who was a 27 year city police officer veteran Who did his job at a high level, but we recognized it was a very dangerous high stress job So I see both sides of that So we want to make sure that the community one has trust and they believe that Policing is transparent and that is community driven But we also want to make sure that officers know that we want them to have a safe job when we know that it's high Stress and it's high demand and and if this is an avenue to promote public safety in a safe community driven way That's something i'll entertain

[FENSKE] So artificial intelligence this seems like the big emerging technology of our time. Is that something you would use in your administration?

[WILLIAMS] To some extent

[FENSKE] Do you use it today?

[WILLIAMS] I do

[FENSKE] you do. What do you use it for?

[WILLIAMS] Um, I think I use it towards you know streamlining processes I think it allows us to be able to Compare information data.

I think data is very important to be able to have numbers I like the idea of getting information that doesn't have Um a bias to it I think a lot of elected leaders sit in rooms with people that tell them what they want to hear I've enjoyed the luxury of sitting in rooms with people and data that's driven by ai That doesn't always tell me what I want to hear and it allows me to think different But I don't think it should replace humans, but I definitely think it's a tool if used correctly that can help us be able to get data Streamline a lot of processes and I would say it's imperative Post-pandemic we've seen that smartphones have become the new way on how people communicate so government should be modern County government should feel old and I always remind people we live in the largest county in our state We drive the economy for the entire state of missouri. We should be leading in all of these areas We should be safe. We should be growing.

We should have a workforce of tomorrow We should be able to create an environment where our county is in for affordable and shouldn't cost so much And lastly we should be making sure that we become a destination For the world once we take care of the people who live here first

[FENSKE] So there are a lot of fears that artificial intelligence could displace a lot of people from their jobs. What would you do? To preserve jobs in the region that are vulnerable to ai disruption

[WILLIAMS] I think the first thing is doing an assessment on how do we make those jobs? One safer and work for the current employees And then how do we train our employees to utilize it to modernize government to make their job easier? I don't think it's a question of replacing humans for robots I always believe that in government having that human touch having a person That can communicate with our residents, especially our seniors and and

you know, we represent I represent a part of the county Uh that has folks that don't have access to broadband continuously Where we have to depend on our public libraries and different assets to be able to get access to the internet I think um, there's always going to be a need for a human element And I don't think we should take that away from our residents, but I do like the idea of us keeping up with the time Modernizing our workforce and most importantly looking at tools to ensure that government feels close to residents and not distant

[FENSKE] Well, Senator Williams you have made it to the end of our citizens agenda I want to thank you so much for joining us today.

[WILLIAMS] Sarah, thank you so much for what you do and it's been an honor to be with you today.