

Race For County Exec: Dennis Hancock Interview

[FENSKE] So we're talking today about the five agenda items that were developed by people who live in St. Louis County, the things that are most important to them.

And the first one, the one we heard from everybody, is the importance of growing the region. St. Louis County has been stagnant for a while. The region as a whole has been stagnant for a while.

What's one thing you do as county executive to make this region more attractive to new residents and to businesses?

[HANCOCK] Well, I think the most important thing that I can do as county executive is put to use my experience in economic development. I did economic development for five years for Verizon and the private sector. And for 12 years as a mayor of Fenton, we worked very hard to grow our local economy there with the loss of Chrysler in 2009.

We worked to replace those jobs, those 4,000 jobs that were there. And today with the activity that's going on at that location, we pretty much have done that. But what it really takes is a partner for government to be a partner with businesses because everything flows from those jobs.

And the businesses are the ones that create the jobs and bring the jobs to the region. What we need to stop doing in St. Louis County is going out of our way to drive businesses away. We had a great example.

There was someone that I know who was going to start a small business. She had a food truck. She wanted a commercial kitchen.

She was going to do catering, something she'd wanted to do her whole life. She loves to cook. What she found was that after almost six months of being told, well, I need one more piece of information, I need another piece of information, she got tired of trying to get a business license, went across the river in St. Charles and had it in two weeks.

We should be able to do that in St. Louis County. There's no reason we can't. But that's the number one thing I hear from businesses is that doing business with St. Louis County is just difficult.

And we have to fix that. And that's fixable.

[FENSKE] So that would be a way of maybe cutting through the red tape, streamlining the bureaucracy there.

[HANCOCK] Exactly. And what we would do in addition to that is welcome those businesses here. We can do a lot of things to make their lives easier by becoming more tax-friendly, getting processing tax payments on time, getting bills out on time.

It really comes down to bringing competence to local government. And as the only person that's running for county executive who has any experience running a local government, I think that's experience I can really put to use for the residents of St. Louis County.

[FENSKE] So the region's population is also aging.

What would you do? What can county government do to encourage young people to put down roots?

[HANCOCK] Well, again, I think it comes back to helping businesses come here. So many young people today look around and go, there's nothing for me here for the future. So they go to other places.

They go to the Nashvilles and Indianapolis, Kansas City and those places. We need to keep those folks here by bringing good jobs here, the jobs that they can earn a good living with, to raise their families, keep their families here, because from all of that comes good schools, better infrastructure. It all ties together, but it's all centered around bringing jobs back to the region.

[FENSKE] One thing that people have talked about as a solution to the region's woes is that we maybe need to do some sort of government consolidation. Would you give serious consideration to a city-county merger?

[HANCOCK] You know, what I tell people all the time is you get on an airplane and they give you the safety talk. And they teach you how to put your seatbelt on.

And they tell you if the mask dropped from the ceiling, put your own mask on first before you try to help somebody else out. That's where I see that we are in St. Louis County. We have to put our own mask on.

We've got our own problems to solve. The city has problems to solve. I don't think putting the two together is going to miraculously solve all the problems in the region.

So I think we have to focus on our own problems, get those solved, and then maybe we can talk about doing some other things to help the rest of the region. But when we talk about the region, we also have to include areas other than the city of St. Louis. We have to include St. Charles County, which is twice the population of the city of St. Louis.

We have to talk about Jefferson County. And those are the places where a lot of the jobs are going and a lot of the people are moving to. So let's look at what they are doing and look at what they're doing right.

And let's figure out how we can all work together on some of those things.

[FENSKE] So going back to the city, what about the idea of the city entering as just one municipality, coming back under that county umbrella? Would you support that?

[HANCOCK] You know, I think that I don't think that many municipalities in the county would want that because of the way sales taxes are distributed in St. Louis County. You have, you know, it's all based on population of the cities.

So that if you bring in a much larger entity, that sales tax pool is going to shrink for everybody else. And so I don't really think that the rest of the municipalities are going to be very happy about that.

[FENSKE] And it sounds like you'd support them.

[HANCOCK] Well, I do because I'd be the county executive. And I have experience dealing with the sales tax distribution in the pool and everything as a mayor.

[FENSKE] Yeah, it's something mayors care a lot about in St. Louis County.

So regional leaders often prioritize their own parochial power over what's best for the region. What can you point to in your past that would show that you're different?

[HANCOCK] Well, I think that number one, I've worked with a lot of municipalities when I was a mayor. You know, working with our neighbors, we built a bridge between Sunset Hills and Fenton across the Merrimack River.

We did the groundwork for that. We worked with them and ended up with a very nice structure to replace a bridge that was 100 years old when it fell apart. So we've done that.

We've worked with when Chrysler was in Fenton. When we found out after they closed, there was only one worker who worked at the plant who lived in Fenton. Everybody else lived all across the region.

[FENSKE] Wow, that's a great statistic right there.

[HANCOCK] Yeah, so we were very instrumental in the growth of the region and the benefit to the region of those jobs. And I think we'll find that the jobs that we have in the city of Fenton today and the jobs that we had when I was there benefit the entire region.

In 2006, the State Department of Economic Development did a survey of every city in Missouri. They asked two simple questions. What's your daytime population and how many jobs do you have? The city that had the most full-time jobs per resident of any city in the state of Missouri was the city of Fenton.

So we had 25,000 full-time jobs in a city of 4,000 people. So those jobs all contributed to the regional economy. And so that's the way that I approach things is not only how can it help the people that I serve and that would benefit from this, but also how does that fit in with the bigger picture? You know, we're part of the picture.

We're a big part of the picture in St. Louis County, but we're not the only part of the picture.

[FENSKE] So 80-something municipalities across the county, you know what it's like to be a mayor of one of them. How would you rally all these municipalities to get on the same page, to work together, as opposed to competing with each other?

[HANCOCK] Well, what I find is that most of those municipalities have their own unique characteristics, and they've developed those over the years, and they've also developed them just because of the nature of where they are.

For example, a lot of people look at Fenton and say, oh, it's just another suburb in St. Louis County. Fenton was platted in 1837, so we celebrated our 150th anniversary a few years ago. You know, you have other municipalities that are really new, Wildwood and Chesterfield, a few others, but they still have a history.

And when you look at those municipalities and a lot of the other suburbs that were created after World War II as a part of the migration out of the city, they developed their own characteristics. So what you have to look at is what's the role of each of those in the county and in the region, and should there be some consolidation? I don't think anybody thinks 80 is the right number. But I don't know that anybody really understands what the right number is.

You know, people have talked about, well, it should be based on population. I can tell you as a city based, you know, a smaller city, we're very self-sustaining in Fenton. We generate enough revenue to pave our own streets and take care of ourselves.

We really don't need to be dependent on others just because we're not as big as some others. But we generate a lot of revenue for the region.

[FENSKE] So the second agenda item that was identified is functional government.

This came up again and again. Here's a quote. The county council needs to stop their infighting.

What will you do earlier in your administration to make sure that county government isn't defined by dysfunction?

[HANCOCK] Well, I think that what I would probably do is continue what we've been doing. Today we have a working majority on the council of three Democrats and three Republicans. We agree on almost probably 90 percent of what comes before the council.

The thing that's causing the dysfunction from my perspective in St. Louis County is the lack of leadership coming from the county executive's office. We get very little direction from the county executive. He comes to the meetings.

He shows up a minute before the meeting starts. He leaves immediately after the meeting's over. There's no conversation.

There's no relationship building. There's no real relationship with the council anymore. And that's sad to see.

When I was mayor, under our governmental structure, the mayor actually led the meetings. And I held the gavel. But it was really interesting to watch the dynamic.

It's easier if everybody agrees and everybody gets along. But what you end up with is not necessarily the best product. Discussion is good.

Disagreement is good, as long as it's done in a civil manner. And I think that what we're seeing a lot of times on the council is being driven by, again, the lack of leadership coming from the executive's office. I would hope to change that by being a leader and by continuing to work closely with the people that I work with today.

[FENSKE] So budgets are really tight right now in the county, as elsewhere. How do you plan to continue to provide basic services at an acceptable level, even as federal support has shrunk, revenue is flat, costs on everything are going up? What would be your plan to deal with that?

[HANCOCK] Well, I think the key word there is basic. We need to really ask ourselves what services should government provide.

I think everybody agrees we have to provide for public safety, so we have to provide police. We have to provide for transportation. So there's streets that need to be repaired.

We share money with Metro out of a couple of the sales taxes. We have to provide for the public welfare. But what do all those things mean? Well, they typically mean a whole lot of different things to a whole lot of different people.

So I think one of the things that we need to do is, and we started doing this as a council, is take a long, hard look at what services are we providing. Back in the day when Chrysler shut their doors, that was 15% of our revenue as a city. We sat down and said, okay, what can we do without? We had some really nice programs for our residents.

We did things like shoveled their driveways in the wintertime for our seniors. We did things like, you know, we cut their grass in the summertime. We gave all of our households a 10% credit on their sewer bills, or \$10 credit on their sewer bills.

[FENSKE] That Chrysler money was nice.

[HANCOCK] It was. And so, you know, people get used to that.

And so I think that when you, you know, what we did was we sat down and said, okay, yeah, these are the nice-to-haves. These are the have-to-haves. And when we started looking at those two lists, it became a lot easier to make those decisions.

And I think that that's where St. Louis County needs to go. We really need a hard reset, if you will, on what are we spending money on.

[FENSKE] What would you point to? I mean, you've been in county government for a while.

Is there something you could point to to say, you know what, we shouldn't be in the business of funding that?

[HANCOCK] Well, you know, I look at, you know, we went through the controversy last year with the animal care and control. The county had outsourced that to the Animal Protective Association at a cost of about \$3 million a year. Last year, after the health department took it back in-house, the line item in their budget was \$6 million for the same services.

You know, is that really the best way to spend our money? Or should the health department be focused on the health of the citizens, making sure that we're taking care, our people are doing the things that they need to do in order to stay healthy? And so I think, you know, as far as the animals are concerned, I'm an animal lover. I have two dogs at home that are both rescues. And so, but when you look at, is that a service that this county should be providing? I'm not sure it is.

And so we would look at things like that.

[FENSKE] So county headquarters, the Lawrence K. Roos building, this has been such a topic of conversation. What would you do with that building?

[HANCOCK] Well, I'd probably do what I've been trying to do for the last three and a half years.

You know, the city of Clayton, just for background, the city of Clayton changed their fire codes in 2013 and gave everybody until December of 2027 to become compliant with the new codes. The only building in Clayton that isn't compliant is the county headquarters. That can has been kicked so far down the road that we are at the end of the road now.

The first meeting I went to three and a half years ago about what's called Project Cornerstone, I asked a very simple question, what's the cost to bring the building into code compliance? Three and a half years later, I still don't have the answer to that question because we wanted a new building and now we're looking at other buildings to purchase or we're looking at buildings to lease. I've been in the facility management business for 25 years. I look at buildings differently probably than most people.

Most people come in the door and they go, oh, isn't this beautiful? I look at it and go, okay, well, that's going to be a pain to change that light bulb. The carpet's got a stain over there in the corner. I look at that level of detail.

And to me, putting sprinklers in the buildings and people I've talked to that are in that business all tell me it's not going to be that expensive to do. It takes, but it's going to take an effort and it's going to take the will to do it.

[FENSKE] So you'd salvage that building, you'd keep that building as county headquarters.

[HANCOCK] It's a size that fits what the need is and it's central in the county. And if we start getting too far out into the suburbs and all that, you're going to inconvenience people who don't, probably the least people, the less people, the people that shouldn't be inconvenienced. Let's put it that way.

And I think that we need to be convenient for people to get to. There's a metro stop right down the street from the county headquarters. It's in a central part of town.

And we just, I think we need to stay there if we can.

[FENSKE] So that building is even more uninviting on the inside as it looks from the outside. What would you do, would you do anything to change the way that it's run to make it and county government in general feel more accessible to the public?

[HANCOCK] Yeah, and I think that's where it comes back to looking at what are we spending our money on.

Do we need to be in a Taj Mahal? No, we don't. But yeah, should the building be functional? I think it should be and I think it could be. And paint doesn't cost much.

Cleaning the carpets doesn't cost much. And when you look at, I used to have a client that was a bank, a large national bank, and when you walked into their facilities, everything was bright, shiny new. But if you went in the back rooms, it wasn't the same building.

It looked much, much different because they spent their money on what their customers saw. And maybe that's where we should be focusing is where do our, what do the people, our customers and people that come to pay their bills or conduct other business with the county, what should they be seeing when they come in? It should be, you're absolutely right. It should be inviting.

It should be welcoming and not, you know, we shouldn't be locking the doors on Fridays because we get mad about stuff. You know, we should be welcoming people. We should be talking about expanding hours, not cutting them.

And I think we need to provide basic services that people want.

[FENSKE] So our third agenda item, this is affordability. Again, this is something that came up from a lot of county residents we talked to.

How would you make sure housing is available for lower and middle income St. Louis County residents? Do you think county government should play a role in that?

[HANCOCK] Well, I think county government can play a role in it. I think that part of that affordability, though, it comes down to taxes and, you know, the way that we have our taxes structured. I think we need to help people stay in their homes, and that's why I'm proud to have sponsored the senior tax freeze in St. Louis County.

It's saving seniors some \$400 to \$500 a year on their tax bills. It doesn't sound like a lot, but that pays for prescriptions. That pays for food.

That helps with the affordability crisis. I think that what we also need to be looking at is what is our available housing stock and what can we do. I know we established a land bank last year, but we also need to look at what's going into that and what's the plan for properties that we're putting in there.

Should we be working with landowners? Should we be working with property owners and landlords and folks to encourage them to keep their properties up? And I know that there are a lot of municipalities around that, you know, are criticized from time to time for being the landscape police, but, you know, if I'm living next door to someone who's let their house run down, I don't like that. That brings the value of my home down, and I think that we have to be concerned about that, and I think that we have to be fair with our enforcement, but we have to do the enforcement piece as well.

[FENSKE] So you mentioned the senior tax freeze.

That has saved seniors some money, but at the same time school districts have complained about this. So it sounds like you do support continuing that program. This is something you're proud of.

Are you concerned about the impact to school districts? Is there something the county should do to help them?

[HANCOCK] You know, when you look at the numbers, and I looked at the numbers before we even brought the idea of the senior tax freeze forward, I couldn't see any school district, fire district, any of the 330-odd taxing jurisdictions that are in St. Louis County taking any sort of a real hit on their revenue side. You have inflation. Seniors are still paying taxes.

They're still paying property taxes. They're only not paying the increment, and so when I hear school districts say, oh, we lost \$3 million, well, losing \$3 million means it got taken out of your account and put somewhere else. Not getting \$3 million that you were hoping to get isn't the same thing, and I think that's what we're seeing in the various taxing jurisdictions around.

It's not that they lost money. It's that it didn't grow as fast as they were hoping it would.

[FENSKE] Yeah, I think what they're saying is inflation is through the roof right now, right, and so their costs are going up, up, up.

At the same time, now they're locking in low revenue. This could compound over time.

[HANCOCK] Well, but at the same time that their costs are going up, the property taxes of everybody in St. Louis County are also going up by that same inflationary factor except for the seniors.

So you still have several hundred thousand households whose taxes are going up at the same rate of inflation that the school districts and everyone else are, but the only exception to that is the seniors who are still paying the base taxes. So I question the numbers that they're pointing to. They're not sharing those numbers with anybody, and so that always tells me maybe there's more behind the scenes that we're not being told about.

[FENSKE] Some suburban areas are seeing growing opposition to apartments and multifamily developments. Do you think the region needs more multifamily as a pathway for

younger or lower-income people to get their footholds in a good school district or a nice part of the county?

[HANCOCK] I do, and I think that one of the things that I drive by every day is a brand-new apartment development that's going up at I-44 and 141 where we've had a dearth of apartments over the years. It's nice to see that going up.

The rents for that are going to be fairly expensive. This is for young people being marketed towards young professionals, just the kind of people we want to have in St. Louis County. I think that we need to encourage some of that, but it has to be done in a smart fashion.

You don't want to put 1,000-unit apartment complexes in the middle of every neighborhood. It just doesn't work. That's one of the ways that we can work with the communities in St. Louis County and the municipalities in St. Louis County to see what regulations do they have in place, what can we do to complement that and can help them with that housing shortage.

[FENSKE] So you wouldn't support at this point a moratorium on multifamily housing in the county?

[HANCOCK] I would not. I think that we need to encourage people to come, not discourage them because we don't have housing for them.

[FENSKE] What about North County? Do you think it should see extra incentives for development and investment?

[HANCOCK] I think that when you look at where is land available to develop in St. Louis County, a lot of it in North County.

You look at the old Jamestown Mall site. To me, that would be an ideal place for some large-scale development, a manufacturing development, some other business development, something that could anchor that area and attract other businesses, like businesses or supportive businesses and people to that area. That would then help with the housing shortage up there because that all flows from those jobs.

I sound like a broken record sometimes for people who are under the age of 50. That's one of those brown things that used to play music. But when you look at what's going on in the county in general, this is where we need to encourage businesses to come and to work with them and help them find homes and help them find areas to grow.

Like I said, probably the biggest area that we have where there's available space is in North County.

[FENSKE] Is that mostly a matter of trying to cut red tape, welcoming them to that area, or is it also a matter of incentives, cutting taxes for people who'd be in certain parts of the county?

[HANCOCK] If we do our business development correctly, we don't need to worry about incentives. They're going to want to be here, and that's where businesses look at various things when they're considering an area.

One is the available workforce. They look at available properties. They look at the workforce, and they look at the education of the workforce.

They look at what's the tax rates for it. I'm not saying that businesses, we can't give incentives to folks that want to be here. I'm open to using any tool that's in that economic development toolbox, but it needs to be the right application.

I tell people all the time TIFs and TIDs and SIDS and all these different three-letter opportunities can be great things, but they're like any other tool. If you don't use it correctly, it can cause problems. I can drive a nail with a screwdriver.

It's going to take me a long time, and it's not going to be very effective, or I can use a hammer, which is the appropriate tool to use. And so I think when we talk about incentives, we need to do what's appropriate for that situation.

[FENSKE] You spoke earlier about that senior tax freeze.

Do you think the county needs to do more to support seniors at this point, and if so, what?

[HANCOCK] Well, I think that, you know, as a senior, I think that one of the things that the county can do and should do and has done is make it so that I can stay in my home. One of the biggest drivers behind the senior tax freeze were seniors saying, I can't afford to stay in my home because my house has been paid for for a long time. I worked hard my whole life, you know, and now I can't afford to stay there because my tax bill keeps going up and up and up, you know, double digits, but my income isn't because I'm on a fixed income.

I'm on a pension or Social Security or whatever. And so I think by doing the senior tax freeze, we help those people stay in their homes. And so if there are other programs similar to that that we can look at, I think we should.

But I think we can also look to expand those to maybe not people who aren't seniors, maybe families with young children who also feel the burden of ever increasing property taxes. You know, when they're trying to put their kids through school and, you know, keep young kids in clothes and food and everything else that they seem to go through faster than you can restock the pantry. So I think that we need to look at what can we do to help those folks as well.

[FENSKE] So our fourth agenda item, this is infrastructure. So county resident Bob Watson told us, he said, quote, I am surprised to see roads that are in need of repair. Big Bend, Hanley, Laclede Station, stretches of all three roads are rated as poor under the county's own system.

And those weren't the only roads that were in bad shape, again, under the county's own ratings. What needs to happen to fix that?

[HANCOCK] Money. And I don't mean to sound glib, but that's what it's going to take.

And so when you look at, and that goes back to what we talked about earlier in terms of prioritizing spending, what should we be spending our money on? We have arterial roads in the county that are a mess. We have subdivision roads in the county that haven't been touched since they were built, and some of them in the 1960s. So you look at them and you can't tell they were ever paved.

We need to take a comprehensive look at that. The council allocated \$40 million out of the NFL Settlement Fund for subdivision streets. That got us to page 2 of the 100-page list that the county has.

[FENSKE] I'm surprised you even got that far.

[HANCOCK] I mean, it's a huge need. And so we need to really, when we start talking about prioritizing spending, that's what we have to look at is what can we do? Because, again, if arterial streets are drivable and accessible, that means that businesses are going to want to come to be along those roads, and they're going to have a way to get their employees back and forth from work to home and back.

So I think that it all ties back to economic development and being focused on what's it going to take to grow the county and grow the region.

[FENSKE] So the advocacy group Safer Streets for the St. Louis Region, they said in 2024 alone the cost of traffic accidents throughout St. Louis County exceeded \$900 million, and a whole lot of that gets borne by the taxpayers. One solution that you see a lot of advocates touting is calming traffic through infrastructure, things like bump-outs and median islands.

Sometimes people don't like these. We saw what happened with Clerks and Road in Chesterfield. Do you support more traffic-calming infrastructure in St. Louis County?

[HANCOCK] Well, I think we have to talk to the people who drive on those roads before we should start calming things down.

I think that we have to ask ourselves, why is there heavy traffic on those roads? Well, maybe because there are businesses there. And if we start restricting the amount of traffic, we're going to impact those businesses. And using Clerks and Road as the example, that's who we heard from.

It was primarily the businesses, not the people driving. It was the businesses whose customers couldn't turn into their parking lots without embroiling themselves in a road rage incident with the guy behind them. So I think that we have to look at holistically what are we doing with our roads.

And again, a lot of it's going to come down to money, and a lot of it's going to come down to making the roads drivable. And are there speeding issues in the county? There are speeding issues everywhere. One thing I would help is something I notice almost every day.

We've got some pretty bad drivers around here. And maybe we need to help educate some of our drivers that slowing down, that wide pedal in the middle actually helps. You can drive with that too, not just the gas pedal.

[FENSKE] So would this be a public education campaign you do as county executives?

[HANCOCK] That might be less expensive than rebuilding all of our roads.

[FENSKE] So MetroLink, MetroBus. Do you think the current level of service in the county is adequate for the needs of people who live there?

[HANCOCK] From what we hear, yes.

I've been talking to the people who utilize the service. The one group that is the exception to that are those who are physically challenged, who need help from Coloride and those types of specialized services. It's better than it was a few years ago.

It's still a challenge. And I think that when you look at those folks, they tend to be underserved members of our community. The goal is to keep them in their homes.

The goal is to keep them in the community where they can be a productive part of our community. But if we can't get them to doctor's appointments or to the grocery store or to work, that's a bad problem for all of us. And so I think working with Metro, we need to solve that issue as far as expansion of MetroLink and all that.

I'm encouraged by the fact that Metro decided to not build the rail line on Jefferson and just use a high-speed bus.

[FENSKE] The bus rapid transit.

[HANCOCK] Rapid transit, because what that does is it gives you flexibility.

If that route doesn't pan out, maybe you can move it to someplace else. If it's steel tracks in the pavement, that's hard to move.

[FENSKE] If the city does go ahead and get that route built down Jefferson, would you support extending it into the county, maybe getting it to UMSL eventually?

[HANCOCK] Well, we'd have to look at that.

And I think that Metro's not going away. The taxes aren't going away. So let's make sure that we're getting our fair share, and let's make sure that we're getting our fair share of the services as well.

One of the things that we look at, and it's part of our budget process every year, is how much of that money should be out. The money that we have some control over should be allocated to Metro, and how much of it should be allocated to our own street needs that aren't necessarily served by Metro. So that becomes a real balancing act for us, and it's one

that I know Talby Roach comes to us a couple of times a year, and sometimes he leaves happier than others.

[FENSKE] Do you think going forward you'd like to see less money going to Metro, have more for the roads?

[HANCOCK] I think we have to look at it, and I think we have to make sure that we're considering everything when we do that. That's a tough decision to make, and I think that those are the types of decisions that a county executive has to make. And I think it's something that a leader who has experience dealing with those things is what we need in the county executive's office.

[FENSKE] So we've come to our fifth and final agenda item. You've made it through the hard part. This part is a little more forward-looking.

It has to do with emerging technologies. We realized a lot of people had questions and concerns about these things, and one big thing, data centers, keeps coming up. Do you think the county should allow data centers, and I'm talking big data centers, to be built?

[HANCOCK] You know, I made it a point a long time ago to never say never.

I think that you have to look at the circumstances surrounding it. You have to look at what kind of jobs are coming with it. Do we have the infrastructure in place to serve it in that area without creating a detriment for the people around it? But when you look in St. Louis County, excuse me, and in St. Louis region, we have data centers all over the place, just not the big monster ones that you hear about for AI, but they serve the region today, and I think that they create good jobs, they create good-paying jobs, and those are the types of jobs we talked about earlier with young people, and how do we keep them in the area? Maybe one of the ways we do that is by making a concerted effort to attract those types of businesses.

I know back when I worked for Verizon, I worked on a project in St. Charles County called Missouri's Technology Triangle, where we targeted an area between Highway 40, Highway 70, between the Missouri River, where 40 and 70 converge in Wentzville, to attract technology businesses, and that's how we ended up with MasterCard there, with the Missouri Technology Park was already existing there, but they've expanded since then. You look at developments such as Wing Haven, which were built around a business community, and most of the businesses at that time were technology businesses, and then you go a little farther east, and you get to O'Fallon, and you see all of these large footprint buildings. There's a lot of technology businesses all along that corridor now, but that's what we focused on at the time.

We created a marketing plan for that area, and I would love to see us do something like that in St. Louis County.

[FENSKE] Do you think the county needs to put in regulations that would minimize how data centers could put demands on electricity, put demands on water?

[HANCOCK] I think that, again, I think we have to look at each situation as it's presented. I think that we can control things to an extent with zoning, but I think that you have to look at what are we excluding from that as well.

Everybody's talking about data centers for AI. What comes after that? What's the next generation after that? Are we positioning ourselves to attract those folks as well? I think that's where we really need to be focusing our attention is not so much of what's here today because it's already here, so let's focus on what's coming. While data centers seem to get a lot of headlines, they really aren't.

I don't know that they're necessarily the boogeyman that everybody's making them out to be.

[FENSKE] Something that seems to be coming is the idea of using drones as first responders. This is something the city is doing.

The police board recently signed off on this. Would you support the county doing a similar program?

[HANCOCK] We use technology in policing today. We have something called ShotSpotter, and it's spread throughout parts of North County where technology picks up the sound of gunfire and alerts the police so they can start vehicles rolling that way without having to wait for a 911 call.

And that speeds up response time, and the faster the officers can get to a scene like that, the better the chances are they're going to find who did it, and if somebody's been injured, they can get them help right away. So we're using some of that technology. And, you know, again, I go back to my analogy.

Technology is great if it's used appropriately. You know, if we're using it to ensure the security of neighborhoods and areas that need more policing, it may be a cost-effective way of doing it. If we're using it to do things that we shouldn't be doing with it, that's probably not a good idea.

[FENSKE] So with artificial intelligence, is that something that you would use in your administration as county executive?

[HANCOCK] I use artificial intelligence every day.

[FENSKE] Do you? Yeah, what do you use it for?

[HANCOCK] You know, I use it for writing things. I use it for looking up information.

You know, it used to take me, you know, two minutes to do a couple of different Google searches. Now I can do it with one search. You know, I think that I'm not a fan of being on the bleeding edge of technology, but I think proven technology and using technology in the way that it's designed to be used can be a very useful tool.

I know my wife uses one of the platforms every day just to look up stuff. And she's become a fan of it. My wife was a technophobe for a long time.

[FENSKE] Now she's in.

[HANCOCK] Now she's in. She's all in.

[FENSKE] And I think that's maybe why, you know, people are increasingly afraid or certain that AI is coming for so many of our jobs. Do you think there's anything that the county executive should be doing or county government should be doing to get people ready for the job disruption that's ahead?

[HANCOCK] You know, people have said technology was going to be taking jobs for a long time. I haven't seen it in my lifetime.

You know, it's the economy always adapts. And there are always entrepreneurs who are willing to take the risk and start something new. You know, five years ago, nobody was talking about AI.

And today it's all over the place. Well, what was, you know, everybody uses the, you know, the worst, the people who hated the automobile worst were the buggy whip manufacturers. Well, but they found something else to do.

And that's one of the great things about our economy is it's resilient. And what I, you know, would like to see the county doing is instead of worrying about, you know, how is this technology going to affect us, is really how can we attract the entrepreneurs who are going to be bringing along the next generation of technology or the next generation, the next big thing, if you will. And, you know, what can we do to attract those folks and make them, help them be successful?

[FENSKE] Well, you've handled all of our agenda items here today.

You've run the gauntlet. You're at the end. So Councilman Hancock, thank you so much for joining us.

[HANCOCK] My pleasure. Thank you for having me.