

An Interview with Senator Mo Denis

Perspectives from the COVID-19 Pandemic: Leadership and Learning in Nevada

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Each interviewee had the opportunity to review their transcript. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the interviewee. This interview features Senator Mo Denis, State Senator for Nevada Legislature, and was conducted on 7/28/22 by Magdalena Martinez. This interview covers topics including reflections on leadership, organizational challenges, and opportunities for collaboration.

Interview with Senator Mo Dennis

Date: 7-28-2022

SPEAKERS: Magdalena Martinez, Mo Dennis

Magdalena Martinez [00:03]

All right, great. Thanks so much, Senator Mo Dennis. Today is July 28th, Thursday. And I just want to ask you again if you consent to being a part of this conversation, this research.

Mo Dennis [00:19]

Yes, I do. I consent.

Magdalena Martinez [00:21]

Thank you. And if you consent to being recorded.

Mo Dennis [00:23]

Yes, I consent to be recorded.

Magdalena Martinez [00:24]

And one other thing, actually. I forgot about this one before we turned on the recorder. If it is okay to attribute any quotes to your name? Of course, that would be with your approval once we send you the transcript.

Mo Dennis [00:37]

Yes, that would be fine.

Magdalena Martinez [00:39]

All right. Thank you so much. So, as I mentioned, we are interested in looking at the COVID recovery in Nevada specifically. And rather than a strictly quantitative analysis, we really want to get more of a qualitative, where we get into the experiences of policymakers. And really, just to figure out what were the biggest challenges, what were the opportunities, and what are some potential lessons learned? So, from that perspective, if you could tell me, Mo, from your perspective as a state policymaker, how did you see your role as a policymaker?

Mo Dennis [01:17]

During the pandemic? So, yeah. I mean it was like uncharted territory, so it felt like we really knew what that would be. But we knew that we had to play some kind of a role in being able to make some decisions – the governor couldn't just do everything all on his own. At some point, we would have to weigh in. And besides that, constituents were wanting to know what we could do, and we were looking for different things we could do, right? Which included looking at any policy things we might have to change in order to handle the pandemic. But it also included doing – gathering food to give out to constituents and those kinds of things.

So I mean I know that's something that I participated in during that – and some of us legislators got together, and we were putting together food boxes for people, and making sure that they knew about vaccines, testing, and those kinds of things. So definitely, getting information out to constituents, and then doing what we could because, like I said, it was a new thing. Nobody really knew what to do, but we felt like we needed to do something.

Magdalena Martinez [02:35]

Mm-hmm. And from your perspective, what were some of the biggest challenges as a policymaker?

Mo Dennis [02:49]

Well, I think the biggest challenge is the unknown. It makes it a lot easier to fix a problem if you know what it is you need to do to fix the problem. So I think that trying to figure out what we needed to do and what our role was. We meet in session only every other year, so when we have emergencies, the only option we have is to go into a special session.

Magdalena Martinez [03:12]

Mm-hmm.

Mo Dennis [03:14]

So trying to figure out, if we did go into a special session, what is it that we would be going in for, right? And then also, trying to figure out what our federal delegation was doing, to see what was coming down the pike. So there were a lot of those kinds of things. I think I should say though, the number-one priority is making sure that my family was safe and taken care of our immediate needs so that I could be able to do some other things to help other people.

Magdalena Martinez [03:50]

Mm-hmm. So if you could, Mo, walk me through that timeline of the COVID crisis. What happened, and what did you do? So the shutdown happened in March 2020, right?

Mo Dennis [04:12]

Right. Yeah, we were, at that point, trying to figure it out. We had things that were planned, and that had to be changed once everything completely shut down. Trying to figure out how we were going to communicate amongst ourselves. It was just a time of really, every day was a new thing. Trying to figure out what we've got to do, and a new thing would come up. So that was all part of that issue, when everything shut down is, well, and how soon are we going to be able to get back up?

Magdalena Martinez [04:54]

Mm-hmm.

Mo Dennis [04:56]

And how do we protect people, and make sure that whatever we're doing is going to protect lives and families?

Magdalena Martinez [05:02]

Mm-hmm. Is there any particular policy or initiative, that comes to mind, that was really important or really a great barrier to addressing some of the, as you mentioned, some of the constituency's needs and the communication issues among the body, and then, just as a family? Anything that comes to mind?

Mo Dennis [05:32]

Well, we had a lot going on during that time, trying to figure out – the communication part, we weren't used to doing Zoom. We may have, on occasion, done some kind of a Zoom-type thing, but nobody was really prepared for that. I happen to be a computer guy, so for me, I knew I was going to have to set up some kind of system here at home, to be able to do Zoom and to properly communicate. Not just to connect, but to make sure that the connection was good.

One of the things, early on is we got to upgrade our internet because we just didn't have enough bandwidth. My wife is a 1st-grade teacher, so, at some point during the pandemic, she had to go back to teaching, but she was teaching from here. I was doing – we were having legislative meetings almost on a weekly basis.

Magdalena Martinez [06:32]

Mm-hmm.

Mo Dennis [06:34]

And trying to figure out what needs to happen and plan for a special session. And on top of all of that, we had our own health issues that we were dealing with. My wife had thyroid cancer at the beginning of the pandemic.

Magdalena Martinez [06:49]

Oh.

Mo Dennis [06:52]

And so she was going through recovery, in that part, right, when everything shut down, and before she had to go back in the classroom. So it kind of worked out because she lost her voice for three months, and so she wouldn't have been able to go back into the classroom – or, at least, do the Zoom meeting, for that matter.

Magdalena Martinez [07:07]

Mm-hmm.

Mo Dennis [07:10]

So we had that at the beginning. And then, as we went on through the pandemic, we obviously had to deal with all the issues before going to session, which included a special session. We then had to get ready for a session. We were going to spend over half of the session in our offices, not being able to meet in person. So trying to get ready for that, that part of it.

And then as things were progressing, and we were – vaccines became available, and making sure that we were able to get those, and then others were able to get those. And then, coming out of

session, it still was an issue, right, and we still had our own – at that point, we were able to, coming back out – we had been actually, for the most part, we didn't – other than my wife's issue with thyroid cancer, we, pretty much, had been fairly healthy during the whole time; until January of – actually, it would have been January of this year.

So, on the tail-end of what was going on, that Omicron surge, and everybody – my family got COVID there at the beginning of the year. So we were having all these extra meetings. Even after session was over, we had to follow up and make sure that we could allocate the federal money that was coming and make a plan for all of that. And then, on the tail-end of that, I got diagnosed with prostate cancer. So we had cancer on both ends of the – and in addition to our family, we gained a grandson because my son and daughter-in-law adopted an 18-year-old young man, who was a part of our church group, who was being raised by his grandmother. She passed away from COVID. His great-grandmother then took over, and she passed away from COVID. And so they adopted him, so then he would have a place to stay and be taken care of until he can get on his feet as an adult.

Magdalena Martinez [09:37]

Mm-hmm.

Mo Dennis [09:40]

So we had all those things going on at the same time that we were doing all of these other things. And during the – especially the shutdown, the Hispanic Caucus was working on doing food boxes. So we were doing those a couple of times a week, and trying to not talk to people, but be able to help and get food out.

And so it was definitely a busy time. I wasn't really able to do much in my employment, which I'm semi-retired, but I also do real estate. And even though real estate prices have been really good, the last while, during the middle of the pandemic, it was really hard to work – because you couldn't show houses. So that also was a big challenge economically in that respect. But we were also getting paid for all of the legislative stuff we were doing. We were getting paid more than we normally would in an interim, which still isn't much, but every little bit helps. And the fact that we were staying home, we were able to save money and that kind of thing. That was helpful.

Magdalena Martinez [10:53]

Mo, I'm so sorry to hear about your wife's diagnosis and yours. I hope you're both doing better.

Mo Dennis [10:59]

We are, we are. Both of our – my wife, they took out half her thyroid, and the other half has a little, teeny bit of cancer still. But we went to a specialist; we got a consult from my UCLA specialist, that said, "Hey, you don't really need to do anything. It's so slow-growing that she shouldn't have an issue." So she's doing fine. And I went through radiation treatment, and everything seems to be fine. So we caught both of ours, I think both in stage I, and so it made it a lot easier to try to treat. You obviously have to wait five years to make sure, but both of them are fairly slow-growing cancers. And we had some access to healthcare, so that was really helpful.

Magdalena Martinez [11:46]

Yeah. Well, thanks for sharing. I'll be thinking of you and your wife. And your children, too; that's wonderful to hear that. They adopted an 18-year-old, and they were able to provide a stable, loving household for him, despite the trauma that he's had to endure, losing his grandparents and his great-grandparent.

Mo Dennis [12:11]

Yeah.

Magdalena Martinez [12:11]

You must feel very proud.

Mo Dennis [12:14]

A great addition to our family. I mean he has emotional issues, but my daughter-in-law's really good at working with him on those kinds of things.

Magdalena Martinez [12:20]

Yeah. In thinking back, what are some potential lessons learned, both personally and professionally? There were such huge challenges at all levels. Looking back, what do you wish, perhaps, would have been available, that can be available for future crises?

Mo Dennis [12:49]

Well, I think we've made a really huge improvement in how we can communicate in times of emergencies, where we can't get together in person. I think making sure that we keep up to date with the technology and work out any issues that – when we first started doing Zoom and other things, there were technical issues. And fortunately, the tech people at Zoom and other places were updating their software to accommodate all these new uses.

Magdalena Martinez [13:17]

Mm-hmm.

Mo Dennis [13:22]

But I think that's important – that we've got to have a way to communicate during whatever; a pandemic, or any kind of emergency, where – and I think we've finally figured out – I think that one of the positive things, though, of the pandemic was that it forced everyone to really look at how do we communicate, and when do we really need to be in person, versus when can we meet remotely. And how can we make our meetings more meaningful, and get more things done, and perhaps do it with less time because of just that kind of thing?

Magdalena Martinez [13:54]

Mm-hmm.

Mo Dennis [13:57]

So I think that's a good thing, and I think that's something we need to make sure that we continue, moving forward. I've kind of thought about the legislature and how they functioned during the pandemic. I think the special session was an opportunity to do some things. But

sometimes the governor basically gets left on their own to try to put together some of these things. And I don't know if there's some things we need to look at there at the legislature.

The fact that we meet every other year makes it a little challenging when you have to try to adjust budgets and that kind of thing. I think that with the special sessions, we were able to do that. I don't know if in the future, as we continue to have all of these kinds of issues, just having a legislature that meets every year helped. I'm not quite sure what the answer is. I know we've tried to do that in the past.

Magdalena Martinez [14:57]

Mm-hmm.

Mo Dennis [14:59]

But I just see some of my colleagues at some of the other legislatures, and how they handled things a little differently. Because they didn't have an every other year thing, and they have kind of a structure in between. Which is really hard for us, as legislators is we don't have staff really when we're not in session.

Magdalena Martinez [15:17]

Mm-hmm.

Mo Dennis [15:20]

So if we have a lot of constituent issues like we did this last year – the fact that we weren't working and we were kind of stuck at home. That gave us a little more time to be able to respond to constituents, but it was just a little harder, you know. The unemployment issue was huge – the issues associated with that. We have some staff, but we basically have seven people for like 63, as far as constituent's services specifically.

Magdalena Martinez [15:50]

Mm-hmm.

Mo Dennis [15:52]

The legislature was great because everybody just kind of chipped in and helped in however to make that happen. But it's something I think we need to think about how do we help people when we don't really have folks to help us to be able to help other people? I think that way we look at rainy day funds and how we prepare for the future, I think this has caused us, perhaps, to think about that in the budgeting process.

Magdalena Martinez [16:27]

Mm-hmm.

Mo Dennis [16:29]

We not only have this pandemic, but we continually are seeing forest fires because of climate change. Those are expensive, and yet, we are starting to adjust our budgets to a new reality; that it costs a lot, and we've got to set aside more money for those kinds of things.

Magdalena Martinez [16:51]

Mm-hmm.

Mo Dennis [16:54]

I think having the new funding plan for education, I think has been really helpful. Because I think that's going to help – even during the pandemic, we're going to have a rainy day fund that's separate from the regular. In the past, what always happened was yeah – we have a financial downturn – less revenue – and the first thing we cut is education because it's the biggest item, right?

Magdalena Martinez [17:18]

Mm-hmm.

Mo Dennis [17:21]

It's the easiest one to be able to cut a lot of money off of. With this new funding plan, we have a separate rainy day fund that could be used to help mitigate some of that. Also, just the way that it's funded, more money is actually going toward education instead of going back into the general fund. Those kinds of things, I think, will be helpful as we move forward. And if we have any additional issues that come up, to bring stability to education. Because as we know, that was a challenge, education; trying to educate through a pandemic, and being able to have – I think that I've been on the educational technology commission from its inception when it started way back, and I was just a parent, way before I was in the legislature.

Magdalena Martinez [18:13]

Mm-hmm.

Mo Dennis [18:16]

It probably would have been 20 years ago or something. When we first got sixty million to try to get technology, we spent most of that initial money just putting electricity into classrooms. They had one plug – by the time you did the pencil sharpener and the overhead projector, you didn't have anything left for a computer.

Magdalena Martinez [18:29]

Mm-hmm.

Mo Dennis [18:31]

But now, today, fast forward: we've got a lot more access to computers. I think we still have a ways to go to make sure that we have internet in the classrooms, but we've got technology, and we've got devices that could be used. So I think some additional things there need to be done as far as – especially not only for education but for the community. Because we relied so much on technology to be able to communicate with folks to even just fill out applications [for] unemployment and all that other stuff. A lot of that is being done online. So I think making sure that we continue those infrastructure upgrades to make sure that all Nevadans have access to high-speed internet.

Magdalena Martinez [19:20]

And Mo, you have been a champion for both technology and education funding for some time.

Mo Dennis [19:25]

Right. Yeah. I spent my career in technology, so I'm well aware of how it works and the necessity to – I've always advocated for making sure we have sufficient funds for technology. Which means not just having computers, but also having people that can fix them and keep them up and running. And especially in education, others can teach people how to use technology. And the pandemic really forced not only educators, but everyone to start using technology. Some people that were just kind of holdouts, that wanted to keep doing it the way they've always done it, didn't have much of a choice and had to learn some technology to be able to survive through the pandemic.

Magdalena Martinez [20:11]

Mm-hmm.

Mo Dennis [20:15]

And as far as the state, we've done a lot to change our technology. I think we've gotten rid of all our old systems now, and I think we have one that – the last COBOL programming is being phased out now. And so I think, as a state, we're still way behind when it comes to technology and what we need to do.

The other thing we found out during the pandemic was the cybersecurity-type issues, the attacks that are coming, and the money we need to put in to protect. So that – making sure that we're doing all of that to protect people's data and all those kinds of things are really important.

Magdalena Martinez [20:59]

Mm-hmm. Mo, from your perspective, were there particular groups that were hardest hit because of the COVID recession and COVID crisis?

Mo Dennis [21:11]

Well, as I've thought back on it, there's some people that did fine because, for whatever reason, they had income coming in. I know we did fairly well through the pandemic because we had some income coming in. And even though you didn't have to spend as much, it worked out. But I know people that had to work through the pandemic, whether it's the – especially, you know, I represent the largest part of the Hispanic community percentage-wise. And a lot of our folks, the ones that work, if they worked in hotels, those got shut down, right?

Magdalena Martinez [21:49]

Mm-hmm.

Mo Dennis [21:50]

But they were working in grocery stores or working in places where they needed to continue to work. And not all of them had access to healthcare; especially initially, they weren't all, perhaps, taking it seriously, and were having health issues. I think, definitely, the – I would say, the more economically-challenged folks probably had a harder time getting through the pandemic, just

because – and they didn't always have access to technology. They didn't always have – getting access to food. There were a lot of people that were providing food, so I think they were able to get that. But I just think that there were some challenges there; that they had to continue working, and yet, they were more at risk to get sick. And there were many that had to go into the hospital; many that passed away, I think disproportionately, to the rest of the population.

Magdalena Martinez [22:53]

Mm-hmm.

Mo Dennis [22:56]

It seems like I've seen some reports on that somewhere, but I haven't seen anything recent. I'm saying anecdotally, just from the folks that I know, and that live in my neighborhood, and people that I go to church with, and I see all the time in the schools, and that kind of thing. It just seems like there were some challenges there in that community.

Magdalena Martinez [23:17]

Mm-hmm. That's helpful. Now, in thinking about the different levels of government, in terms of the federal government versus the state, which you are intimately familiar with, and a contributor to. Then there's local governments, Clark County, and the municipalities. What do you wish the different levels of government would have done or could do differently during the COVID crisis and the COVID recession?

Mo Dennis [23:48]

Well, I think communicating is just critical between all the different levels of government. I think there were some times when everybody wasn't on the same page. And so, you know, I think we learned from that. I think we got better as we went. But definitely, being able to communicate, you know, it's really hard when you – especially with the different levels of government and throughout the whole state, and you've got different people that felt differently about the whole thing, right?

Magdalena Martinez [24:22]

Mm-hmm.

Mo Dennis [24:24]

You've got the full gamut, from those that just felt [it was] some fake illness that didn't exist, to those that, perhaps, were even more sensitive or whatever, and trying to get – local government has to deal with constituents. And we saw, throughout the whole thing, there were some people that just thought – they spent a lot of time protesting on many facets of issues; whether it's wearing masks, or whether it's the racial issues.

Magdalena Martinez [25:01]

Mm-hmm.

Mo Dennis [25:03]

So I think there was a challenge, and each local entity had to deal with that. And then we had to deal with that at the state level and the federal level. And so, having good communication there, I

think it got better as we went. But I think that we need to make sure that we follow up on that, to make sure that that communication – how we move the money around quickly, to be able to give help to the people that needed it at the time that they needed help. I think that's a challenge and an opportunity that we have moving forward.

Magdalena Martinez [25:36]

So I've heard a lot of respondents talk about the issue of communication and how that could have been improved. Was the issue simply basic information, or was it technology? Was it, you know, kind of the communication lines? What was difficult about the communication or lack thereof?

Mo Dennis [26:07]

Well, I think probably, a little bit of all of that, right? Making sure that the technology was there, so people could communicate with [each other], and just making sure that everybody knew who to talk to.

Magdalena Martinez [26:22]

Okay.

Mo Dennis [26:25]

Because some people were ill, so it's like the person you normally would have talked to maybe wasn't there. And so, you're talking to a different person, and then, nobody really knew everything; where they needed to – who they call, or what they needed to do to get access to the funds. So, all of that. Just making sure that everybody was on board on that issue. And then the other communication issue was just the issue that there was a difference in opinions about what needed to happen, and how do we resolve those kinds of issues. To be able to work those issues out.

And in addition to all of this, you had some people that passed away and stuff that had critical roles in some things. So just making sure that the backup is there for that, and making sure that we can get those relationships – which everybody that works in government knows that the number one thing is relationships. So making sure that those are – I think that we realized during the pandemic that maybe some of the relationships that we didn't pay as much attention to, that we need to pay more attention to now, moving forward.

Magdalena Martinez [27:56]

Okay. Mm-hmm. That's helpful. Thank you. We've talked a little bit about the lessons learned during COVID, and what we can apply to future crises. Do you think there were some innovative ways that the states have dealt with the challenges of the pandemic and the recession? I know you touched a little bit on some policies and resources. Do you think you could talk a little bit more about that? Some innovative ways that states have dealt with the challenges of the pandemic and the recession?

Mo Dennis [28:39]

I think there's a lot of different things going on. I think that probably, the biggest innovation had to do with – I'm trying to think – what specific things? And especially like other states, how did they – it depends on the state how they handle their budgets, their legislature, and their ability to

move quickly. I think that some of the innovations that we're seeing are with how money's being spent, the federal money that's coming. Being able to use this as an opportunity to fix some things that we've been putting off for a long time that really need – like infrastructure, for example or even some of the – just yesterday, our – it was Tuesday – I can't remember – in the last couple of days, with interim Finance, we approved, you know, a bunch of nonprofits receiving some help.

Magdalena Martinez [29:41]

Okay.

Mo Dennis [29:43]

It's going to be able to go into the community and try to help mitigate some of these losses and challenges that we've run into during the pandemic and try to get people back up to speed. And then hopefully, set a foundation to be able to move forward. And we've been able to see, you know, the pandemic really brought out what those needs are in the community.

Magdalena Martinez [30:08]

Mm-hmm.

Mo Dennis [30:10]

The different things that we really just take for granted. And especially, the nonprofits do, and some of the agencies. So the things that they do, that we don't realize because they just do it every day, but during the pandemic, it became critical. So I think that folks figured out ways to get things done quicker. I think that's, you know, something we always talk about. And I don't know if it's necessarily innovative, but it is innovative in that we were forced to do it, so people figured out ways to get it done.

Magdalena Martinez [30:45]

Mm-hmm. What are some of those – you said the pandemic brought out some of the resident's needs that nonprofits have been doing for some time. Can you give me some examples of that?

Mo Dennis [30:57]

Well, for example, the homelessness issue I think came even much more to the forefront, even though we were able to do passive things that kept people from getting kicked out of their homes. But just how close people are to being homeless, you know? But the mental health issues, especially during a pandemic when people just didn't know what was going on, and there are so many things going on in the world as it is, even without the pandemic, and put all of that on top of it.

Magdalena Martinez [31:35]

Mm-hmm.

Mo Dennis [31:38]

So, a lot of those services being provided, services for our youth, the kinds of things that they're used to doing, and the supports that they need. Even with education, we're seeing – well, with education, some of the things that we saw is that some kids did so much better-

Magdalena Martinez [32:03]

Mm-hmm.

Mo Dennis [32:05]

-in the pandemic, who used the technology? But others, especially those that are more social, struggled because they were used to having – they need that social interaction. And other kids are distracted by that, and when they didn't have the distraction, it actually improved their grades. I think workers were the same way. I think we found that you know, just because you're working from home, that some people actually are much more efficient and get more work done.

Magdalena Martinez [32:33]

Mm-hmm.

Mo Dennis [32:36]

And so these – but with the issue of the nonprofits, just seeing all the different – I knew there was a lot of stuff out there, and I'm familiar with a lot of the nonprofits. But there's a lot of nonprofits that are much smaller that provide – and we were able to see a lot of those during the pandemic, and the different things that they're providing. I think that's helpful, as we move forward, to know what those resources are. And that, perhaps, as a state, we get a really good bang for our buck with some of these services. Maybe we should be putting more money into those, instead of trying to recreate it ourselves. Other things we do much better and could be much more efficient, but I think we just figured out that there are some of those that really, we could do better.

Magdalena Martinez [33:23]

Mm-hmm. Okay. That makes sense. Thank you. Now, were there any specific policies, that the state or the federal government implemented, that you noticed impacted people, like whether it was positive or negative?

Mo Dennis [33:38]

Well, the health mandates, you know? The masks.

Magdalena Martinez [33:43]

Mm-hmm.

Mo Dennis [33:45]

I think that was helpful, but some people didn't think it was. But I think it really helped save lives. I know it wasn't that popular. But you know, as a state, we rely on tourism. The last thing we need is for tourists to come here and start dying, and that would just devastate our economy. I think the fact that we were careful and put in place things that would keep people safe, I think, has helped us. Because our economy, especially the tourism economy, has come back strongly. A lot of pent-up demand. And people are feeling safe to be able to come to Las Vegas, and our budgets are way up. We're way above projections. And so I think that was – those kinds of things, making sure that people were safe, I think was a good decision. The governor had to make the decision to do that, but I think it was definitely needed. Because without that, we would have had some other issues and would have had a harder time recovering economically.

Magdalena Martinez [34:54]

Yeah, that's a good point. So that was a big one. Any other policies that come to mind that you think were, again, really helpful, or negatively, positively impacted-

Mo Dennis [35:08]

Well, I think the other thing, and some of the other policies that – at least the emergency policies that were put in place helped us to be able to move quickly.

Magdalena Martinez [35:16]

Mm-hmm.

Mo Dennis [35:18]

And I think that's helped people realize that maybe, some of these things could be done permanently, and not just in an emergency situation. Some of them, we could change to – having access to healthcare workers, for example. During the pandemic, we were able to bring people in from other states if we needed to.

Magdalena Martinez [35:39]

Okay.

Mo Dennis [35:42]

There was the challenge of the traveling nurses, right? That people were just using a lot of traveling nurses, and it was very expensive. But by being able to bring in others from other areas, I think that helped us to get some additional workers that we didn't have.

Magdalena Martinez [35:59]

Mm-hmm.

Mo Dennis [36:01]

I know we've been looking at those issues of licensing and how do we do that. How do we make it easier for people to be able to get into jobs, especially the jobs that we desperately need?

Magdalena Martinez [36:09]

Mm-hmm.

Mo Dennis [36:12]

I think that those are things that we learned from during the pandemic and some of those policies. Yeah, I don't – I'm trying to think of other policies that, maybe were really good or really bad. Hmm. Sorry, to blank at the moment.

Magdalena Martinez [36:37]

No worries. I know that policies related to creating a stronger, more robust workforce, particularly for teachers and healthcare, were something that had been discussed. And I think that within the realm of education, there were some policies that were passed before the pandemic, right? But what you're suggesting is, maybe, being more intentional about those and more proactive.

Mo Dennis [37:04]

Right.

Magdalena Martinez [37:06]

Yeah. Okay. That's very helpful. So I'm going to conclude by asking you a different type of question related to the urban planning that you – the meetings that you've been attending as part of Olivia's [overtalking 37:21] Las Vegas program. So I'm really interested in that, too, and I'm wondering if you could just share with me your thoughts on that. Why you've been attending, and why do you think it's important?

Mo Dennis [37:34]

Well, I think that a lot of times, we go to other parts of our community, or to other communities across the country and across the world, for that matter. And we see things that are done, and then we come home, and it's like "Why don't we have that?" Sometimes we get new things, but they get run down really fast because we don't maintain them. Part of that is our own problem because our folks don't take care of it, perhaps. But part of it is also that it requires extra work, and sometimes, you know, the cities don't allocate the resources – that, maybe, it's going to take more to maintain the east side than it will like Summerlin, for example.

Magdalena Martinez [38:15]

Mm-hmm.

Mo Dennis [38:18]

And I wanted to get involved because I want to make sure that our kids have the same opportunities that any kid, anywhere in town has; whether it's parks; whether it's libraries, whether it's access to education; or having a clean environment and clean air, even. I've worked on those kinds of issues where areas with low poverty tend to have worse air conditions, which causes more health issues for our kids. So having those kinds of things. Having access to doctors, you know? Not always having to go all the way across town, just the wealthy areas, to go to doctors. And having clean streets and clean areas where – so I think that even how traffic moves and all that stuff, right?

So I wanted to be able to share my thoughts on that. I've lived in, at least in this part of the community – I've been in Vegas since '67. And I'll be 50 years, probably, or plus, of that has been over on the east side. I only live a mile from where I grew up. And my house where I was at, before the one I'm in now is literally two blocks from the house I grew up in – that I was raised in. So my kids have been raised here; my grandkids are being raised here. So I just have an interest in wanting to make sure that we can not allow our neighborhoods to go down, but just to have opportunities to have a clean place, that people feel safe, and can raise their families.

Magdalena Martinez [40:15]

And to your knowledge, is this a new initiative for East Las Vegas, or have there been other-

Mo Dennis [40:25]

Well, I know that over the years they've tried new things. I remember when Councilman Reese was there, he worked on a plan to try to bring more parks and things, and we were able to get

some more parks and things. So I think this is probably more comprehensive than we've ever done.

Magdalena Martinez [40:42]

Okay.

Mo Dennis [40:44]

At least in my history with the East Side. I wasn't intimately involved, maybe, when I was younger. But as an adult, I've seen all the different initiatives that have come and the different things that have been provided. And I think they're really trying to do something that will make a huge difference on the East Side.

Magdalena Martinez [41:07]

Mm-hmm. I worked at the City of Las Vegas, I believe, when Reese was there as well, in Neighborhood Services.

Mo Dennis [41:16]

Yeah.

Magdalena Martinez [41:18]

So I think you're right. This is probably the most comprehensive approach to planning for that area, which is really needed. And just one last question. Are you hopeful? And if yes, what are you hopeful for? And thinking about – I know we just concluded talking about East Las Vegas planning – but just in the overall conversation that we've had, we've mentioned that there's a lot of discord within our larger society around many issues: race-related, policy-related, politics-related. And I'm just wondering what your feelings are. Are you hopeful, and if so, what are you hopeful for?

Mo Dennis [42:00]

Well, I'm always hopeful. I'm always optimistic. That I think people are good, generally. People are good, and people are passionate about what they believe in. And I think that we just have to treat each other kindly, and I think we have the ability to do that. I think that, as we do so, that we really can – you could think about all the negative things that could happen and all the things that are happening. But I still think that – perhaps it's my personal beliefs and my religious beliefs in others. That I think we really – I personally believe that we are all Children of God, so that we're all related as humankind. And I think that we can find ways to work together if we're willing to listen – everybody's willing to listen – and we're willing to be able to give and take, I think that we've got a bright future.

With that said, I think that our kids are much better than we are at that. I think they have found ways to communicate. There's technology and other things. I think that we have a bright future, just because our kids are – they see what's going on, and they don't want that. I think they're going to work really hard to make sure that we don't continue that. I think it's mostly us older people that try to hold onto things, and you know, feel like – I think our kids are used to – the one constant is change. I think the older generations, the one constant was they didn't have change, and change has been very difficult. But I think that I have hope that our kids are –

hopefully, we've done some things, in our lives, that have made their lives better, and will allow them to be able to really move forward and do some amazing things, much better than what we ever did.

Magdalena Martinez [44:15]

Thank you so much. Mo, I really appreciate you, and I appreciate your time, and I appreciate your service. It's always good to talk to you.

Mo Dennis [44:20]

Yeah, I appreciate it. Thank you. Thank you for – you know, when we talk about these things and work on these things, I think these are all things that help us to make good decisions. And especially, we rely upon data now. And you can't get that unless you go through these processes to try to figure out what are the real issues so that we really can find the solutions. So thank you for the work that you're doing.

Magdalena Martinez [44:45]

Yes, you're very welcome. You have a good rest of the week.

Mo Dennis [44:48]

All right.

Magdalena Martinez [44:50]

And take good care.

Mo Dennis [44:50]

Thank you. Bye-bye.

Magdalena Martinez [44:51]

Bye.

End of audio: 44:59