

An Interview with Doug Thornley

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

Produced by:

The University of Nevada Las Vegas
The Lincy Institute
2024

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The following interview was a part of the “Perspectives from the COVID-19 Pandemic: Leadership and Learning in Nevada” research project. The recorded interview and transcript were made possible through the generosity of The Lincy Institute at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. The goal of the project was to understand and document how Nevada organizations and leaders responded to the myriad challenges that the pandemic engendered. The interviewees thank The Lincy Institute and their supporters for the opportunity to reflect on their roles throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers also acknowledge the following individuals who contributed to the conceptualization, data collection, and analysis of the project: Dr. John Hudak, Dr. Makada Henry-Nickie, Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio, Taylor Cummings, Peter Grema, Kristian Thymianos, Saha Salahi, Madison Frazee, and Katie Lim.

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 Doug Thornley, City Manager for City of Reno, and was conducted on 10/20/22 by Kelliann Beavers. This interview covers topics including reflections on leadership, organizational challenges, and opportunities for collaboration.

Interview with Doug Thornley

Date: 10-20-2022

SPEAKERS: Kelliann Beavers, Doug Thornley

Kelliann Beavers [00:04]

To confirm, you are agreeing that it's fine if I record this interview. We'll provide you with a transcript to review before we would use any of the information.

Doug Thornley [00:13]

Absolutely. Thank you.

Kelliann Beavers [00:14]

Okay. The first question is, can you describe your role throughout the pandemic, including now, given that the height of the pandemic has ended, and things have changed? But throughout the pandemic, how you saw your role, as well as the role of the city as a whole?

Doug Thornley [00:32]

Sure. So I'm Doug Thornley. I'm the city manager in Reno. My role, broadly speaking, in the organization, is I am the Chief Executive. And so the elected board sets priorities and then has me sort of go forth, and make sure we manage our resources and deploy our resources in the community in a way that reflects the priorities they set, whether through policymaking, or through the budget, or through our other organization's strategic plan.

So your question, as it relates to what was my role, or our role in the pandemic, here in Northern Nevada and in the more urban region, I think, between the City of Reno and the City of Sparks, Washoe County obviously, we all participate as part of the broader district for public health. And so we were one of a number of voices, in terms of how we went about making adjustments to the various facilities used by the public, whether that's on the private side and the regulatory framework or how we continue to provide services on the public side. We had a number of collaborative conversations with our regional partners with respect to the delivery of services. I think that we all walked, pretty much, hand-in-hand with respect to how we were going to handle public pools; how policing was going to work; and how fire service and EMS services were going to continue to work. We were all very similar, if not the same, with respect to how people continue to get building permits, business licenses, and pay bills.

And so I think we did a pretty good job there. I actually think the pandemic, on the delivery of public services, helped us step out as a zone where I think we were comfortable for 30-40 years and caused us to say, "No, we can deliver services, in a more effective and more efficient manner, by relying on technology." I think it helped us get off the dime, as it related to more modern workplace policies and hybrid work options, which I'm thrilled with. We're continuing in that space today. And so, I think in a lot of ways, the pandemic was a catalyst for the modernization of our organization.

With respect to the private side ventures and the regulatory framework that goes with them, we did have, early on, little splits and chasms between the three entities up here, and frankly, in the public health agency. Where we worked hard at finding a balance between what was going to be best for public health, we thought, on the policy side, and what we thought would help sustain, particularly our smaller businesses, through what was initially anticipated to be sort of a really rough patch economically. Now that didn't prove to be necessarily the case, and I think all of Nevada – Clark, maybe more than most, did significantly better than we thought any of us would do through the last year or 18 months. Washoe, as a drive-in gaming market, I think saw less of a dip than Clark, but the fly-in stuff picked up, I would guess, without it in front of me, in that four to five-month range. Where our gaming was back after about a month or two.

So I think a lot of that has to do with the drive-in nature versus the air travel nature of the two jurisdictions. But I think it strengthened some relationships. I think it exposed, maybe, some areas where we hadn't paid a whole lot of attention for a generation, in terms of the way the entities worked together. And I think, coming out of it, we're better for it.

Kelliann Beavers [05:15]

I want to have you talk more about that – the last thing that you just said – but maybe you can fold it into the next question a bit if you feel so inclined.

Doug Thornley [05:23]

Okay.

Kelliann Beavers [05:26]

How you said that it sort of highlighted ways in which you felt like, maybe, you recognized you hadn't been working together in the best ways, and you were able to strengthen and improve that collaboration.

Doug Thornley [05:37]

Sure.

Kelliann Beavers [05:39]

The next question – and you've somewhat done this in what you just said as well. So just share whatever highlights come to mind. Can you walk through a timeline, as you remember it, from the beginning of the pandemic? What happened, what did you do, and how did the response unfold?

Doug Thornley [05:55]

Yeah. So the timeline, as I remember it – so I changed jobs right in the middle of the pandemic. I became the city manager in Reno in October 2020.

Kelliann Beavers [06:11]

Oh, okay. And what was your job prior to that? I apologize that I had not noticed that, but that's really important.

Doug Thornley [06:19]

So my job before that is I was an assistant city manager in Sparks. And so, I was there in March of 2020. The timeline, as I remember it is – obviously for us, and for everyone, COVID becomes sort of a 'blip' in December of 2019, January of 2020 – and the fire departments actually are the ones that, for me, jumped out as like the department sort of raising their hands saying, "Hey, there's a problem. There's a problem. There's a problem."

And so the [06:58] and the fire departments actually did a really good job, I thought, of "Hey, there's a problem, and this is how we will solve it from our perspective. This is how we will do our best to be safe and continue service delivery." And some other departments, maybe, lagged behind in that space.

And I think, like a lot of places, I don't want to say we were late on the uptake, but it probably didn't get the full-scale attention it was due until it was a full-on emergency. And so late February-early March, I think you start having serious conversations. And then frankly, my birthday is March 13th, and I remember we went somewhere on March 13th, which I believe was a Friday or a Saturday. And then that Sunday, I remember – goodness, lunchtime, late morning – the governor got everybody on the phone and said, "Hey, I'm going to close the schools." And at that point, it was all right; every department had to get in a room today – two nights – Sunday night – and we're going to figure out what's going to happen. Because the world is about to come to a screeching halt on Monday.

Kelliann Beavers [08:24]

Happy Birthday to you.

Doug Thornley [08:26]

Yeah. Happy Birthday. So, at least where I was, got all the department heads in a room that Sunday night and said, "All right. This is what's going to happen. What sort of PPE do we need to get on order? What do we have on hand? These are the adjustments we're going to make. Are we in a spot where we can go to a fully remote workforce – in the spaces where remote work works, right? I mean obviously, it doesn't. For public works, it doesn't. For fire, it doesn't. For police – schools are closed, so we don't need to have an afterschool program anymore. Yes, this is probably going to be – this is going to upset the workforce, but everybody's going to be in this same boat relatively quickly. And so what adjustments do we need to make?"

And that was – I don't know. I want to say that those phone calls started happening at about 2:30. The meetings started at about 3:30. And I didn't get home that night until about 11:00. Total Wine delivered beer to my front porch, which was great. (laughter)

Kelliann Beavers [09:33]

And necessary, I'm sure.

Doug Thornley [09:38]

But then it really was – it took three days or a week, and the adjustments were made. And I'm actually super proud of the City of Sparks. I'm proud of Reno. I don't think there was any sort of negative disruption in service delivery across any of the entities up here. And so it all came

together pretty quickly. That said, really formalizing the policies and the procedures necessary to be OSHA compliant took more time, right? Actually documenting them, building them out, and putting them into place. But that got done on the fly too.

And I think back to what you asked for an extrapolation on the first question, and then saying hey, I think, perhaps – whether it's relationship-building, whether it's exercising the muscle, or what have you, there were parts of the intergovernmental affairs between our entities here, the state, some of the state globally, and then the more specific departments, the OSHAs of the world. And that I think the exercise in having to build those things out, while continuing to deliver services, has seriously strengthened the relationships between all of the involved parties. And I think the act of information sharing and developing best practices on the fly, and sort of, hey, did this work for you? No, it didn't. All right. This did work for us. Here's how we think it may be sales for you. Here are resources we can share; I think left our region, for sure, in a better place.

Kelliann Beavers [11:33]

Definitely. I know that's something that's not always easy to make happen. And so this emergency, it sounds like, in some cases, made it happen, which may have boded for the better.

Doug Thornley [11:46]

Yeah.

Kelliann Beavers [11:48]

Do you want to talk a bit about what it was like to transition from the position in Sparks to your work in Reno in October? Because that was still quite the height of the thick of many things.

Doug Thornley [11:59]

Yeah. I think they're different jobs, right, and they're different-sized organizations. So-

Kelliann Beavers [12:09]

Yeah. As an assistant – first of all, learning about what a city manager does at all, through these interviews had been so impactful for me. And I have a master's degree in urban planning. It's not like I have never thought of these things.

Doug Thornley [12:20]

Right.

Kelliann Beavers [12:22]

But I really did not understand the nuances of what a city manager's job is. And so I also did not have clarity about the difference in what an assistant city manager would do, versus what you do now. So maybe you can explain a bit about that.

Doug Thornley [12:36]

Yeah. So by way of background, I'm a lawyer. I don't "lawyer" anymore. When I was lawyering, I did a whole bunch of civil litigation, a whole lot of appeals work, and ultimately was making a living doing the landside stuff. So, acquisitions entitlement, on, and on, and on. And of course, a

lot of that work had me in Vegas. We live up here. I have four small kids. I thought I was being really helpful by doing the down-and-back thing. Where I'd get on the five o'clock in the morning flight, and then be home on the seven o'clock flight. But I was really just not around.

And so, I needed to make a change. I had spent some time in the city attorney's office in Sparks. And around the time I was looking to make a change, the guy who was still the city manager there, [13:29] says, "Hey, is this something you've ever thought of?" And I said, "No, not really, but I'd love to have the conversation." Then, over a period of time, we have a conversation, and he encourages me to apply for this opening, and I do. And I forget how wide the field was – but go on the interview, and I did well in the interviews, and he says, "Well, look. I'd love to have you come over and do this."

And at the time – then and now – Sparks has two assistant city managers. One who does external work, in terms of community development and utilities management. Sort of the parks and rec; the stuff that you see. And one does the internal side stuff: so the government affairs, the human resources, the finance, that work.

And so he asked me to do the internal side – because the person who they have there is an assistant doing the external stuff and is very good at it. But even though a lot of my background was there, I had done enough in the human resources space, over the 15 years previously, that I wasn't starting from zero – not an expert in the space, but I wasn't starting from zero. And I had good relationships with the people in Sparks who were doing it. So I oversaw the internal day-to-day stuff, which was great on a learning curve for me.

And then the job in Reno is available, and I say, well, why not? I live in Reno, I care about the community, and I have some ideas through this experience. I have some ideas that I think will translate well to the larger stage. I'm familiar because of my past background in working as a land use lawyer with a lot of the folks here, and at least, a lot of the public-facing maladies, I think, I know how to kind of cure.

Kelliann Beavers [15:28]

Mm-hmm.

Doug Thornley [15:31]

And so, you know, they gave me a shot, which I'm still super-grateful for. But in terms of the scale of opportunity to make improvement when I walked through the door, I was caught off-guard by the amount of opportunity to work on some stuff.

But as it turns out, right, for me at least, than the way we have it set up here; our ACMs are incredibly talented people, and the day-to-day work that they do is unbelievable. And that really lets me be free to think about the budget, think about how to best accomplish what our electeds want, and run around, and just to be a cheerleader for folks, saying, "Hey, this work is incredible. We want to do *this*. What do you think the best way is? What do you need? Keep up the great work."

Kelliann Beavers [16:29]

Mm-hmm.

Doug Thornley [16:30]

And that had worked really well for us, in terms of fixing internal culture and making this a place where people want to work. That challenge, I think, is making those connections with something that was really hard in that transition, right? Because nobody's here, and they're remote, and just the same as this interview, right? This interview would probably be more effective, in both directions, if we were sitting in a coffee shop somewhere.

Kelliann Beavers [17:02]

Right.

Doug Thornley [17:05]

So it's really hard, I think, to make a meaningful connection with folks who you are meeting for the first time, *this* way.

Kelliann Beavers [17:11]

Mm-hmm.

Doug Thornley [17:13]

Sort of building off that last piece, if we both agree that having an interview like this is more effective if we can do it in person, imagine how much more difficult it is to say, "All right. We're leading an organization of 1,700, and we're doing it through a screen because we can't get together. And we're meeting each other for the first time this way, and we're going to stay interacting this way, for the broader part of a year."

Kelliann Beavers [17:42]

I cannot even imagine.

Doug Thornley [17:44]

It was tough. So I think what's really cool about it is that it affords an opportunity to try things and say – not in a no-fail space, but in a space where nobody's going to get too crazy at you because it's a pandemic.

Kelliann Beavers [18:07]

Right.

Doug Thornley [18:10]

You can say, "Well, shoot. That didn't work, so we need to go do something else."

Kelliann Beavers [18:12]

Mm-hmm. And what I hear you saying is, there was a little bit more leeway to feel like you could take a certain amount of risk, that you might not have taken otherwise, to find the right answer because who's scrutinizing who? Everything is like "the sky's falling."

Doug Thornley [18:28]

Yes. And I think, particularly for us – I don't know what feedback you get from other people. So I'm excited to see what comes out of this. But particularly for us, that has built an important part of a broader culture. Where we're not just talking about, necessarily, the way we communicate in a pandemic. It has made it so we can say to people hey, look. If we're in the space of establishing a standard for what we want to accomplish, and something doesn't work, that's all right. It's not always going to work. And to do the cool things that we say we want to do and to deliver services as efficiently and as well as we possibly can for this community, sometimes things aren't going to work.

Kelliann Beavers [19:13]

Mm-hmm. And you have to be ready to say that, versus going "It's fine, it's fine."

Doug Thornley [19:18]

Right. Or we can't be paralyzed by – we have a thing that we've done for 40 years, and rather than see if we can improve on that, we'd rather just not take the risk.

Kelliann Beavers [19:30]

Mm-hmm.

Doug Thornley [19:33]

That's not a way to run the joint. So it's got to be okay. I think that's helped us there.

Kelliann Beavers [19:38]

Nods (affirmative). Yeah, I can see that being challenging too, maybe. I could see there being a possibility for it being hard to communicate that to the team, right, and have them hear you, and be willing to communicate it in the way you need them to communicate to implement that. Was it challenging, or do you feel like everyone was sort of ready for it, or both, I guess?

Doug Thornley [20:05]

I still don't know that people are necessarily ready for it.

Kelliann Beavers [20:06]

Mm-hmm.

Doug Thornley [20:07]

I can tell you that with our middle-level managers, when we have meetings, and they come through and say, "Well, this got messed up." The leaders that we have inside the organization now say things like "Okay, do we understand why?" And was it something that was within our control, and did we make a conscious choice? And if we made a conscious choice, help us understand why we made the choice that we did. And provided that we're not out in the tail of mistakes that get made and are truly bad, and if everybody is like "Oh, no. We tried this," and either we kicked rocks on it, or for whatever reason, it didn't work. If it's correctable, then we'll get it corrected. If it just didn't work, then great. Let's acknowledge that it didn't work. Let's talk about why it didn't work. And then, let's do better on our next run at it. The surprise of that sort of interaction has been, I think, super-telling for us. And I don't think we're unique in that space;

I think that government, in general, has become super risk-averse – because you hear about it on Facebook when we screw something up. And you *should* hear about it, right?

Kelliann Beavers [21:24]

Nods (affirmative).

Doug Thornley [21:25]

And I think it's just instilling in folks a certain level of confidence to say well, we are doing the best we can with the information we've got. Frequently, particularly at the ACM level – maybe even at the department head level, right? You have to make really hard decisions on 55 or 60% of the information you want to buy a car. And so, you know, with that comes some level of failure, and when you know better, you do better. And I think, just living that has been an opportunity that's broadened the horizons of our team for sure.

Kelliann Beavers [22:08]

Thank you. That's a really eloquent way to put a lot of – that's very interesting, in thinking about how there was so much unknown at that time, that maybe informed the ability to sort of experiment more is interesting.

Doug Thornley [22:23]

It's sort of freeing, right?

Kelliann Beavers [22:26]

In a way, yeah. That's what I'm hearing from some folks. And I think that some people were able to step into that place, or step into their power, and be free, and could just reap the consequences, or say what have you. But I think there are others who sort of wanted to stand at the back of the room because it was terrifying, and I can see how both things unfolded. But in the leadership role that you play, it seems like it's really important, and it's the former.

Doug Thornley [22:51]

Yep.

Kelliann Beavers [22:56]

I want to be conscious of your time. I'm looking at the other questions I have here. And thank you so much. This has already been really meaningful. One of the questions I have that you might have something to share about is, what can we learn from this crisis that could be a lesson for future crises?

Doug Thornley [23:26]

I think, for me, one of the primary opportunities is in the space of, you never want to overreact. And I think, at least for our region, we did a really good job of underreacting to worldwide news, until it was like a real emergency.

Kelliann Beavers [23:57]

It was hard to believe early on. It was very hard to believe any of it. I don't mean that I didn't believe it was happening, the way that some people did, but the gravity of it was hard to accept.

Doug Thornley [24:09]

Yeah. I think that there's that, right? And I think what we preach over here is something that I stole from some parenting book somewhere that Anna and I were reading with respect to our own kids. But what we preach for our leaders over here is that we want them to be the thermostat, not the thermometer. And I think we did a bad job, as a region, early on in that space, right? Because we were so concerned with not overreacting that we didn't do what we needed to really do. To say, okay. If this comes to fruition, these are the buttons we can push, and these are the levers we can pull.

And so, some folks did a great job of being like all right; this is on the horizon. We've got to buy computers. We're going to buy laptops. Why anybody's not buying laptops anymore, and they're still buying desktops or machines that are stationary, with a few exceptions, I don't know. And then what you find out is, a: Are we ready to go to a fully remote space? No, not even sort of. Well, how long will it take? Years. Okay, you have a week.

And so I think – I don't know that dealing with it in February or January would have made a meaningful difference in this instance. But I think in terms of trying to be more adaptable and more current, the way a private-side entity would be, I think that has raised a level of consciousness in, at least, the local governments up here; where people are prone to more forward-thinking in November of 2022 than we were in February of 2020.

Kelliann Beavers [26:18]

Absolutely. If anything comes to mind, what do you think have been some of the most innovative ways that you've seen organizations or citizens deal with the challenges of the pandemic or the recession? It could be examples of collaborations, programs, or anything that you can think of.

Doug Thornley [26:43]

I think that the small businesses, in particular, I know that there are tons of stories out there about how they disproportionately impacted and harmed. I will tell you this: I don't discount that for a minute. I think that's 100% true. That said, at least here in Reno, our business licenses, we have as many or more today as we did in March of 2020. I think the small business community really came together and worked in a collaborative way, instead of sort of sometimes, some of the nonsense economic protectionism that you see the business community engage in. I think they stuck together.

I think the regulatory frameworks, there are arguments in lots of different spaces; whether it's public health, whether it's just general taxation, or what have you. But the way in which the state adapted to move alcohol around, I think is a great example of everybody working together to say, hey – whether it's good or not, we won't opine on. But this is a thing that will absolutely impact the day-to-day life of 2,000,000 Nevadans-

Kelliann Beavers [28:02]

Yeah. And are we sure this is as big of a deal as we thought it was before, when we thought, this could never be-

Doug Thornley [28:08]

Right. We need to find a way to have restaurants go to take-out so that people stay employed and people stay eating. And when that happens, we need to find a way to legally get a Margarita in a Styrofoam cup, from a place in downtown Reno to somebody's residence in the suburbs.

Kelliann Beavers [28:29]

Yeah.

Doug Thornley [28:31]

And that needs to happen relatively quickly, and frankly, relatively uniformly throughout the jurisdictions, so that we have a fair and safe regulatory framework for our-

Kelliann Beavers [28:40]

Yeah. I'm sure that was a complicated aspect. I hadn't thought about that specifically being jurisdictional. But yeah.

Doug Thornley [28:47]

And so, you know, what you end up with, of course, is Jurisdiction "X" that, perhaps, has a more laissez-faire approach to that, versus Jurisdiction "Y," which maybe is a bedroom community governed more by conservative folks, who's like "You want a Margarita in a Styrofoam cup?" driving around? Absolutely not. But you've got to find a way, and you've got to talk about it, and you've got to say, "Look. If we do this, your businesses are going to be harmed by a regulatory decision that we've made over here. So we need you at the table, and we need to find a way through this." And I think – yeah. If I had to highlight one, it would be things – examples like that. Where both the regulatory community, the political community, and the business community came together and said, "We need to build a thing on the fly, so that we can preserve the quality for the folks who make Nevada home."

Kelliann Beavers [29:46]

Thank you. This has been really meaningful, and I know I'm already two minutes over the time that I scheduled with you. So thank you. You are a very eloquent speaker. I learned a lot from you. And I look forward to sharing our deliverables with you, as we start to put together some, so thanks. And it's nice to meet you.

Doug Thornley [30:03]

Nice to meet you too. I can't wait to see what you come up with.

Kelliann Beavers [30:06]

Have a good one.

Doug Thornley [30:08]

You too. Bye.

Kelliann Beavers [30:09]

Bye.

End of audio: 30:11