

Beyond the Dais Podcast: Episode 32 – An Interview with Regional Director of the Pikes Peak Office of Emergency Management Jim Reid

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Scott Anderson: Thank you for tuning in to Beyond the Dais, a podcast about the stories taking place in and around El Paso County, Colorado. I'm your host, Scott Anderson, and my guest today is Jim Reid, the regional director for the Pikes Peak Office of Emergency Management. How are you doing today, Jim?

Jim Reid: Good. Thank you for having me.

Scott: Yeah. Thank you for having us over here. I really appreciate it. So, before we get started, I wanted to quickly add that if listeners are interested in more stories about people doing good in and around El Paso County. We're hearing from county leadership about local government priorities and how they operate. You can find additional episodes of this podcast on your podcast platform of choice. But to get things rolling here, Jim, I was wondering if you could start off by giving a bit of your background prior to your current position.

Jim: Sure, I was fortunate enough to start a career with El Paso County in 2003 when I was hired as the County Fire Marshall, Deputy Fire Marshall. By law, the sheriff is the fire Marshall, and there I had the responsibility of wildland firefight. Fighting hazmat response Emergency Management, I guess the quote I always use is "if the sheriff couldn't shoot it, cuff it or tase it, it ended up in my office", and so that's about the same time that we got Homeland Security. So, a decade of that and we built huge capability for meth lab responses, white powder responses and multiple fires to include the Waldo Canyon fire during that time frame and then right after the Waldo Canyon fire, I was fortunate enough to obtain the position as the Executive Director of the Department of Public Works. Great job, great people, a lot of work there. I was able to do that for about 6 years and then I was offered this position to take over Emergency Management for the region.

Scott: And what are some of the learnings that you gained from those previous positions that have helped you in this current role?

Jim: So, I know in the Sheriff's Office there's a lot of legal that goes with responses and learning the county because basically I fought fire all over this county, 2100 square miles of it, and working with the first responders very closely during that decade. And then the transition to the Department of Public Works was the infrastructure. I learned a

lot about the road infrastructure, the infrastructure of the county at South flood zones. The whole 9, I mean, it was just a lot of great information that I learned about infrastructure and how it works and how it's protected and how it needs to be fixed and so that that was a huge lesson for me. And then when I got into this role, it was an easy transition obviously with the background. I think it, it helped me through my time here. My tenure is in this role.

Scott: Great. And now that you are in this role what are some of the responsibilities that come with that?

Jim: So, all of it I think we are responsible for educating the public on how to be prepared for emergency events. We support all our first responders, that's 28 fire departments and seven police departments. We work with AMR, the ambulance provider for both the city and county. All the first responders to include health department, Human Services, whatever the case may be, whatever needs to happen, we're here to help and get that coordinated. We also provide emergency planning and training for events within the county and city, and we do that regionally. And I think what has really worked well in this is that when we give these trainings, we bring both county and city staff and it's the same training. It's consistent and that has made a big difference in our ability to support our folks out there in the field.

Scott: And so, for those listening, we are recording this episode at the beginning of March 2023, and your last official day is actually March 31st. So, you're on your way out.

Jim: Absolutely. My first day of retirement will be April Fool's Day. Fantastic. I can't think of a better day to start your retirement.

Scott: Absolutely. So, what are some of your hopes for the incoming regional director and maybe some advice that you would give to them?

Jim: So, I think we are certainly not perfect. That it was bringing two cultures together was quite the task and we were able to do that with the help of staff and management and bringing that all together under one roof was a quite the event. We have laid though, I think, a very strong foundation for the regionalization of Pike's Peak Regional Office of Emergency Management, and I think the incoming director has a highway they can just take this and go wherever they want to go with it. So, I'm really proud of the staff and the support that we have to at least put them in a position. You know currently we're working on accreditation and once that accreditation process is done then I think they have an opportunity to take something and really go far with it and I'm excited for them.

Scott: And you mentioned bringing two cultures together, right? So, what have you seen as the benefits of that transition from the old way of doing things to now having that regional approach and response? I mean the county itself is as big as some states. So how do you go from, you know, those two different ways of looking at things to now

having that regional approach and then covering that amount of ground that you do here?

Jim: Sure. It was an absolute gift. The county had one way of doing things. The city had one way of doing things. We brought those two together. We determined a third way and when you think about it, when you bring those two offices together there's force multiplication, there's more people doing the same job for everybody across, and that regionalization also caused some standardization. You know, we worked with our GIS, our PIO offices, our roads crews, our fire guys, our law enforcement and when you bring that together to a one-stop location it really takes a lot of confusion out. Am I in the county, do I call the county OEM, am I in the city, do I call the city OEM? So, it gave us an opportunity to build a central location, not only for training, coordination and being better prepared to serve our public. And that's the important thing and that's the whole reason for it. As we grow, we're at 735, 737-thousand people. We will hit a million at some point. It's important that we take the confusion out of it and make it simple for our public to understand what's going on. But it also helps our first responders. It's a one-stop shop, they can call, and we can make things happen. And I think it was, it was very good. It was very fortuitous by our leadership that said, "Hey, we need to do something". I can tell you that during Waldo Canyon fire we had two different OEMs and there were some concerns about you know, how do we communicate with each other. And I think that's been eliminated. If you hadn't noticed that this facility that we've built has both county and city network. We have large training venues here and we encourage people to use our facility for training because it comes as a standardized central hub for everyone. So, what a great opportunity, what a great thing we're doing. And the coordination between the two entities is just wonderful.

Scott: And you talk about training opportunities here. What are some of those training opportunities for those who may be in the OEM space? If it's something maybe they're looking into going into, what sort of training opportunities do you have available?

Jim: Well, the nice thing is, is if you want to get into OEM, we have a couple of employees that are starting on the ground level and learning, and they're not constricted to a very small office. They're actually working a large area Office. So, any training that we can get through the state on Emergency Management, any training that we can offer our county leadership, so they have a better understanding of what we do and what goes on, we take full opportunity to that. I think a career with the Pikes Peak Regional Office of Emergency Management is a great place to start. It's a huge place. You're going to, you're going to touch everything, every part of Emergency Management that's out there. And I think anybody who has the opportunity to work for either the city or county, what a great career and there's a lot to do and as we continue there will be more to do. And as I said earlier, I think the next director is gonna have a highway of opportunity. And so, what a wonderful place to start a career.

Scott: And for those people who may not necessarily work for the city or for the county. You know, maybe they work in the private sector, maybe they're not even you know,

tangentially related necessarily to Emergency Management - why do you think it's still important for those higher-level of employees and companies to be aware of Emergency Management and still maybe take some of those training opportunities?

Jim: Well, I think it's important because preparedness, you need to be prepared. Look, we are not exempt from events, from catastrophic events. We're just not exempt. And so, it's important that these outside organizations understand what their role is when we do have an event. That may be evacuating their building, that may be taking care of their staff. Their businesses are important to our community, and we want their businesses to be able to survive and operate and continue to operate. And so, in that light, it should be important that they know how to recover quickly, get their folks back to work and continue to provide the services that they provide to our public. So, it's real important for them to understand that we do have some businesses that we work very close with. We also work very close with the higher education. They have been absolutely phenomenal and working on being prepared to take care of their students and take care of their college, and I can't speak to, I've never seen the higher education as involved as most of these are here in our region. So, we're very fortunate.

Scott: Now, you brought up catastrophic events. Obviously, that's a thing that you guys deal with the majority of the time and we're getting closer into wildfire season again. We're in March now. What are some things that you would tell residents that they should be aware of to help prevent those things from happening? Because, in your experience, are wildfires generally man-made, are they generally natural disasters in the sense that, you know, lightning strikes somewhere and there goes a fire? What has been your experience in that way?

Jim: Yes, to all the above. You just never know where it's going to come. You just don't know how it's going to be. Look, you're not going to be able to stop wildland fire, but what you can do is prevent it from getting bigger, right? And so, it's important that you mitigate your properties and make sure that you know, you limit the amount of fuel that's out there. But, I think even more important is, is you should have situational awareness, you know, are we dry, are we in a red-flag mode? You know, is there a potential for a wildland fire? How do I prepare? What's most important is that they take care of their families, and they know where that's at. You know, a house can be replaced, a person cannot. And so, what's really important is, I would hope that the citizens would, you know, have alternate communication, to have things that help them, you know, for at least 72 hours or more. Be prepared for those type of things. They're just going to happen. And I think that's where I think again, I'll go back to how fortunate we are in this county. When you look at how everybody works together, county emergency, emergency response forces, city emergency response forces, they're not two separate, they're one team and they work very close together. And I think our community is very fortunate to have that. That type of attitude when it comes to protecting our citizens and protecting our folks and there's a lot of work. As you build more homes, you build more impermeable space. So, your flooding is higher, right? The water, it's got to drain

somewhere. It's got to go somewhere. And we have a, you know, our county is beautiful. I mean you go out east and it's flat, it's prairie and cattle and in some cases sand. And then as you go further west you get into the mountains, and you get the trees and all that. So, we have a a county that's very unique. We have a very diverse terrain here in the county and I think that adds to the, you know, being prepared and getting ready. You look at Highway 115 and how beautiful it is there, but in some cases it's only one way in and one way out. So, I think situational awareness being prepared is so important for our citizens, we don't want to lose any of them.

Scott: Now near the top you mentioned being a fire marshal, and certainly now in this position that you have been in for the last three years, you've been able to respond to those natural disasters. Can you talk about some of those experiences that you've had in responding?

Jim: Sure. When I started in 2003, I thought it was kind of interesting. We had a meth epidemic, and it was huge, and we were just constantly running on meth labs. And eventually, you know, with the restriction of certain chemicals and certain medications, they were able to slow that down. But it was a huge epidemic, and we were just constantly on the road, multiple prairie fires. I mean we always have those. You know when you have wind and heat and dry and grass that's tall, you're going to have those type of fires. And then we went into the white powder incidents where everybody was calling in white powder incidents and we were very busy with that. The other thing we dealt with was the Waldo Canyon fire, which was probably the biggest fire that we started out with, and we made it through that. There was a lot of lessons learned from that fire. That was one of the biggest ones I was involved with. And then the flooding afterwards, you know when you get a fire that is that hot, the ground becomes hydrophobic, it doesn't absorb water and therefore it's just like water running over a rock, and so we had to deal with that. So, the recovery on that was almost a decade by the time we've recovered from the Waldo Canyon fire. But again, I'll go back to how everyone worked together to try to manage that. And the time one team came in and we were part of that huge, huge event. Huge lessons learned, but glad I was there and glad I worked with the people that I worked with during that event. And then I had the opportunity to go to the Department of Public Works. Where, you know, we have roads that, you know, we have to maintain and then the Black Forest fire kicked in. Now fortunately for me I was not part of the firefighting of that. Where I stepped in was the recovery of it, and basically that was, I remember Commissioner Glenn saying, "hey you know it's 4:00 o'clock in the afternoon. I want a plan on my desk by in the morning". And I worked through the night and got that plan on his desk for the recovery plan. It was a long night, but we got it done and we stuck to it, and we were able to bring the community back and that's, that's the most important thing. We can have the disasters, but let's bring the community back as soon as we can.

Scott: Now, not exactly a natural disaster, but you were in this role during the COVID-19 pandemic, right? So, can you tell me what learnings you were able to take away from that in terms of the regional response?

Jim: So that was, and I'll say how fortunate we were to have a combined OEM at the time, right? And the health department was really good. They came down here and said, "Hey, we've got this thing going on, here's the potential for this pandemic. How can we work together?" And we did – we consolidated forces. So, a lot of my staff worked closely with a lot of the health department staff as we worked through this thing, and I have to tell you, that for that response, two years and five months we were active. That tells you how long it lasted for us. That coordinated response really shown how important the consolidation of the two OEMs were because we did not differentiate between city and county. It was our community. It was our region that we responded to with that, and there were a lot of good lessons learned, but I tell you, the biggest one was working together as one team. One fight and we did that, and that's, I think, that is what led to the success of our response of the county's and the city's response to COVID-19.

Scott: So, what do you think the response would have been like and how would it have been different if we did not have that regional response in place for that pandemic?

Jim: Sure. You remember now, keep in mind the health department serves the entire region as well. They're a regional office, right? You would have had the city OEM who had their nuances and things they had to do and things they had to take care of and focus on and probably the larger, they probably have close to half a million of the 737 thousand in their city, as well as the homeless population and all that. And then you had the county. Between the two different OEMs, the two different directions, the non-coordination. I think there would have been a lot of confusion, you know, unless we were to bring them together for the event, which is what we've already done. And so, I think that's what's important. You know that some of the things that we had during the Waldo Canyon fire was, we would call our counterparts on the city side and have a tough time getting what we needed and vice versa. They would be calling us and would be so busy, but with us sitting in the same room, looking at each other – wow. I mean, that just takes all of that out. And so that's what was so important, and that's why it works so well. Again, we go back to one-stop. You know, people called here who were, you know, who live in the county or who live in the city. It doesn't matter to us. They're still part of our region and we were able to address their needs without them having to go, "Oh no, don't call us, call them". That went away. And I think that's key and that's why it was so successful.

Scott: Yeah. No, that sounds wonderful. So, I just wanted to give you an opportunity here. We're about to ready to wrap it up. Is there anything else you wanna add – let people know about the office of Emergency Management, or about your time here, that you think would be good for our listeners to know about?

Jim: Yeah, I'm gonna speak a little bit, I think. The county and the city. I worked for over 17 years with the county. You know, they, I'm grateful to the county. They gave me some really great opportunities to do things that I love to do. I've always wanted to be a firefighter, and that's all I ever wanted to do. If you'd asked me if I wanted to be an emergency manager, that was a no. I wanted to pull hose. But life kind of has a funny way of telling you, "Yeah, you're a little bit too old for that". So, you better figure out how you can still contribute to the community. I think that the county gave me such a wonderful opportunity and were very supportive. I mean, I ran for Sheriff unsuccessfully, but who would think to do something like that. I mean, that's a big deal to step out there. But that servitude was important to me. I wanted to continue to serve. You know, I'm retired Air Force. I served my country, and I had the opportunity to continue to serve my community here in El Paso County. And you know what? Without the least mental reservation or equivocation they gave me, they allowed me to do jobs for them that had a large realm of responsibility. And I so much appreciate that opportunity. I mean, how often, you know, again, I go back to working with the Sheriff's Office. Working with our roads crew, running Emergency Management. I cannot thank the county enough for that opportunity. And then the city stepped in and said, "Hey we want you to work with the county and bring this together". And I thought "Wow, what a great opportunity", and again, extremely grateful for that opportunity that they trusted me to do something that was probably, for the first time, that we actually brought a city and county entity together to act as one team. And we were successful in doing that. And so, I'm grateful to the leadership on both sides. But more importantly, I think I'm more grateful to the people who work in the county and in the city. You know, the things get done because of them, not because of us. Things get done because of the staff that work here. And when you look at the staff that work in the county and the city, wow, I mean just phenomenal people that want to do good and do the right thing. And I think things will not happen if it wasn't for the staff. On either side, I mean, they really want to do a great job and they want to see things progress and they want to do good things and they do that. And so, I think, you know, we can talk about my accomplishments, but they would not have been possible without the folks that I worked with and without the folks who were in leadership roles who supported us in getting those things done.

Scott: Well, thank you, Jim. I appreciate you taking the time today and for your service here in the El Paso County community.

Jim: All right, thank you.

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