

All Up In Your Business | The business of managing College Station
Jay Socol, Bryan Woods
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Jay Socol:

Welcome to All Up in Your Business, I'm Jay Socol, and in today's episode we will focus on the business of managing the City of College Station organization.

Jay Socol:

So, here with all the answers is City Manager Bryan Woods, who came to College Station in late 2018, had a year-long absence to deploy with the U.S. Navy Reserve and has now been back with us for several weeks. So, Bryan, thanks for temporarily saying no to all the local media that's been trying to get this interview and saying no to Oprah, as well, until All Up in Your Business could get this exclusive sit-down with you first. So, thanks for coming in here, by the way.

Bryan Woods:

Yeah. Thanks for having me. And I don't prefer to see it as an absence and more of just as remotely as you can work.

Jay Socol:

That is a remote work scenario. You took that to the extreme.

Jay Socol:

So, let's go and start out with the year you were overseas. So, even though the city council handed over the keys to Deputy City Manager Jeff Capps, you were actually able to stay plugged into a lot of the issues and the conversations. So, talk about how that was even possible.

Bryan Woods:

Yeah. And, I guess, to start, I can't say enough about Jeff Capps and Jeff Kersten and Jennifer Prochazka. I mean, I could name 100 people who did a fantastic job leading the city while I was gone. But also, by allowing me to stay involved through contact. I think one of the interesting pieces of kind of going through the pandemic was we all had to figure out how to communicate remotely. And so, for me, being in the situation I was in where I think, in years past, we certainly would have had communication with the staff, everything was set up so that it was a little bit easier to still be involved, whether that was talking to staff, or watching city council meetings from the Middle East, or anything else we were doing.

Bryan Woods:

So, fortunately we had good communications infrastructure wherever I was and was able to have those conversations. It meant for some late nights because we had a little bit of a time difference, but that really helped. And then, there's the other part of it, which is just being able to stay on top of things through the local media. And that's also a really nice thing when you're away just to kind of remind you of home and see how things are working. So, it worked surprisingly well. And I kind of said all along, I stepped out of the city manager role and just became more of an advisor to Jeff and the team.

Jay Socol:

But you guys were really in pretty regular communication throughout your time, right?

Bryan Woods:

Yes. We talked, I mean, sometimes daily. Obviously, there were certain situations where I was out doing specific Navy work where I wasn't able to have communications, but yeah, we really had at least the availability of daily communication via email, or phone calls through that. And then, like I said even on certain occasions, being able to be on city council meetings and talk about some of the specific issues. So, it was really a lot better than I had expected. And a lot better than I think a lot of people advised me it would be, they were kind of like, "Hey, you need to let this go. It's gonna be hard to stay involved." But the technology helped but, again, I attribute it really to the city council and the staff, and the community's kind of willingness to work with me so that I could still be involved.

Jay Socol:

So you've been back for like six weeks or so into the office?

Bryan Woods:

About that, yeah.

Jay Socol:

So, how have you approached reintegrating back into the organization, both with staff and with the city council?

Bryan Woods:

So, I guess it's like anything, you have a plan until it actually happens, and then you realize that maybe you got to adjust. And so, when I first came back, I took a couple of weeks just to be back with my family. I had some time before I was actually home where I was in the United States and we had a little bit of downtime. So, I did use some of that time to really try and catch up on a lot of the day-to-day business stuff that was going on because that's the challenge, is you come back in, and I think I've described it to folks before, you come back into to your home, or to your job. And you know it, you know the people, and you know the general construct, but a lot of the stuff has been moved around. So, it's learning to locate where kind of everything is.

Bryan Woods:

Council has been really good about that. I've spent some time meeting with them individually and, obviously, trying to get up to speed on what's going on in the community. So, that's kind of what I've done, meet with the different directors, spend a lot of time with the city manager's office, just trying to help them, or get them to download to me. And then, same thing with meeting with people in the community, who've been incredibly supportive. People who have seen things going on for the last year, from that perspective, which has been really helpful.

Jay Socol:

So, it really hasn't been terribly difficult...

Jay Socol:

Well, I know one thing I was thinking earlier was there are at least one or two new department heads, new directors that came in while you were gone. So, you had to come back and actually face-to-face meet new people.

Bryan Woods:

That's right, yeah. We hired some people at the beginning of the pandemic, so when we were doing everything virtually. And then we also had department heads come in, specifically Planning and Parks while I was out. I was still involved in those processes. Now, I wasn't as involved as I would have been if I was here, but I did get to speak with them virtually before we ever offered them their jobs. And then get to talk to them a little bit, but had not met them. And then, in a couple of cases, because we were still navigating the in-person piece of everything with COVID, didn't meet them until a couple of weeks actually back on the job, which is strange because normally it's the exact opposite. I, and the CMO are the ones who are talking to those folks and know them the best before they come in. So, that was definitely different. But it's been really nice just to get back and see everybody in person.

Jay Socol:

So, I know you had a job to do while you were deployed to the Middle East, but a lot of us here were sort of joking around like, "Do you know how much he is just spending time thinking about all the things he's going to do when he gets back?" I mean, but seriously related to the business of the city, how much time were you spending just sort of planning out what you were going to do when you came back?

Bryan Woods:

So a lot. Obviously, you have the job at hand over there. And sometimes it is very at hand and you're 100% laser-focused on what you're doing. But you do have some downtime. And it was interesting, especially having spent a year and a half or so doing things and pushing initiatives, one to sit back and watch other people take that over and put their spin on it, which was incredible. And being able to reflect a little bit on some of the things that I thought worked, or weren't working, or we were going to have to try and figure out now that we were in this new reality.

Bryan Woods:

I also spent a lot of time with the guys over there. They would engage on some of the topics over here. And we talked about it a lot, both as it related to College Station, and even local governments as a whole. So, we had a pretty good, little focus group over there where we'd throw out ideas and talk about things. And then, certainly, was communicating some of these things back to staff and saying, "Hey this is something to think about when we get back."

Bryan Woods:

Christmas in College Station was a big one that we had really talked about, was in its infancy when I was leaving. And then, seeing that develop and coming in and thinking, maybe we could try this, or maybe we could try that. So, it was an interesting environment in that I obviously had a job over there that took up a lot of time. But I did not have the kind of 24 hour a day job of trying to make sure everything is going on in the city. And it gave me some time to think about things in a strategic way that you don't always get when you're trying to run an organization.

Jay Socol:

Yeah, right.

Jay Socol:

So, you have a lot of big issues in front of you now. If I'm guessing about at least some of those near the top of the list it would be preparing draft FY '22 budget, maybe helping jumpstart College Station's hospitality industry, shepherding some capital projects, especially the new city hall that's being built. You want to start with the budget scenario that we find ourselves in right now?

Bryan Woods:

Sure. I think obviously that's one of the main jobs as a city manager to prepare a draft budget. But I say all the time that's the council's budget, obviously, but it's really for the community. What we put in that budget is what we care about, what we're going to do. So, it's incredibly important. And it takes tons of time and effort, and prognostication by people smarter than me to figure out what are the revenues going to look like? And then, try to work on how are we going to take those revenues and translate them into what the citizens, represented by the council, want to see happen in the community. And we we've talked about it before, the way we do that with the budget congress, which really is just a way to get input from our departments and the people all the way down to the ones who are doing the work on the ground.

Bryan Woods:

So, it's a tremendous amount of work. I'm incredibly pleased with where we are. We've been fortunate that we pulled back a lot of things and tried to be very conservative with the unknown of COVID, and what that would do, not only to the city's budget, but just the community as a whole. And, again, getting to be involved in it, but also look from the outside. It's just incredible how, not only the city staff and the council have adjusted, but the community, the private sector, the citizens how they've done things. And I think where we find ourselves, not just from a budgetary perspective, but overall is in a better position than we thought we would be in.

Bryan Woods:

Now, that shouldn't discount that some people are still suffering and have suffered heavily. So, all of those things are going into my mind when we prepare this budget. How do we deal with what really was a completely different year? A hard one to say, what's the next year going to look like now? And then how do we do the things that are going to help support what the council wants to see, the community wants to see and really support the community as they are trying to recover? And, and that goes to that tourism piece that you mentioned.

Jay Socol:

So, I know we have a long ways to go before we're done with the FY '22 budget, but do you have a sense yet, even before this thing has been fully formed and given to council to consider, do you have a sense of where some of these priorities are going to be? And some of them are the same year to year to year. But do you have a feel for where you hope to be able to put some emphasis for council?

Bryan Woods:

Sure. I mean, I think obviously from a community standpoint, we're trying to still get our arms around all the federal aid that's going to come in and how we utilize that. So, we know generally what we're going to get, but anytime it comes down from the federal government there's a lot of specifics about how you use that money. But one of our charges is, hey, that's money that's coming in, we're going to try to utilize it to the full extent that we can to meet these priorities that we have, whether it's infrastructure,

or services, or recovery funding. So, that's a big one. That one is lagging. And that's because the information continues to trickle down from the feds.

Bryan Woods:

From the budget as a whole, I think we're looking at the things we always are looking at. How do we support public safety in a growing community? How do we support services? A huge one is just trying to get back maybe to the levels of staffing and service that we had pre-COVID because we provided service at a very high level but it was, a lot of times, modified because of what we could do. So, it's trying to make sure that as we roll back into, I guess, a more typical model of service delivery, that we've got the pieces in place for that. For me, it's certainly making sure that we're taking care of staff and being a place that people want to come to work because we are, at the end of the day, customer service, personnel driven organization. That's, that's what makes things happen in the city. So, it's making sure that we're staying competitive with that financially, and just from an experience standpoint.

Bryan Woods:

And then, again, just looking at the resources we have and trying to make sure we allocate them in a way that we're moving the needle a little bit on council's strategic priorities. But also giving ourselves the ability to adjust over what will still be a strange year. One that won't be typical of other ones. So, I think that's the focus is how do we do all of those things in a way that gives us the flexibility to adjust to whatever this next year is going to look like.

Jay Socol:

Right. So, when you came back and you saw the actual structure of the new city hall, being what it was a few weeks ago, that had to be super exciting for you. And so, I think it's going to be an iconic generational building. And I know that you personally oversaw a lot of changes to the initial design. And you're being very intentional about what it will allow us to do and how you hope the public will use it and experience it in a variety of ways. Would you explain some of that?

Bryan Woods:

Sure. And, obviously, coming from a background of construction it is exciting to me. Most times, if there's a construction project going on I'm in it the entire time. And although, virtually I did spend a lot of time while I was over there weighing in on things. It is a different thing to leave a parking lot or an open field and come back to the building that we see there. It's exciting.

Bryan Woods:

But you're absolutely correct. So, the building that we're in now, the buildings because there are multiple, some that we rent have definitely reached the end of their lifespan. So, there's good reasons that we need office space. And I think we've provided a building that will be around well into the future from a standpoint of utility and that's important. But, to me, the bigger thing is this is definitely a community, and hopefully an iconic, building, not just from the look of it. I mean, it is striking. I think it is going to be something that creates a lasting image in College Station from a building perspective.

Bryan Woods:

But the most important thing is that it is a community building. And it won't be good enough for me if we just have a really great city hall where people can come and take care of their normal day-to-day business with the city and go to city council meetings, that's one thing. But we built this with the hopes

that it's going to be really the center of a community where people can come use this for their events and their groups, and to have a discourse about all the really important things that have to go on, and to be a gathering place.

Bryan Woods:

And so I think the building, as it's shaping up, really has the potential to do that. Once it's built, if it's built correctly, then the challenge is, is how do we go out and engage people and get them to utilize it. And make sure that they understand that this is the citizens of College Station's building that there's an office in there that I'll occupy, but it's not mine. And the best thing for it is if it gets used by people in the community.

Jay Socol:

But you're talking about people even using the building during non-traditional days and hours.

Bryan Woods:

Yeah, 100%. I mean, I think that's what I look at any time, especially, I mean, not just on this building, but anything we do, my idea of government is being as efficient and as effective as possible. And if you're building, whether it's buildings, or anything that we do, it's how do we utilize it the most? And during the day from a practical standpoint, we use it as an office building. We have meetings, we do all these things. And there's going to be, hopefully, more of that community interaction during the day as possible.

Bryan Woods:

But when the vast majority of staff leaves after a normal work day we still have this amazing resource that can be utilized by lots of other people and groups. And so, it's trying to work on how do we do that? How do we encourage people to use it? To come and take advantage of these rooms, and conference rooms, and different areas? The building has been designed, hopefully, to allow that, so we can close off the kind of work areas and offices that won't be as public, but let people utilize that.

Bryan Woods:

So, that'll take some work and it'll take some interaction with other people, and seeing how they want to use it. But, to me, it's about figuring out how do we make that happen? Not about saying whether we can, or we can't. It's just a matter of how do we do that? And how do we meet the needs of the people that are really going to use it for things that the current city hall is just not usable for?

Jay Socol:

And I'm asked all the time, I'm sure you are too, what happens to this current building? Yes, eventually when the time is right, it gets razed, it'll be scrapped. But talk a little bit about your vision of what the area surrounding city hall, the grounds, the plaza, what have you, will become.

Bryan Woods:

Yeah. And I think, again, it's something that'll be developing, but the building will exist until we can move in. And then, it'll be razed and we'll kind of finish out the site. But I think that's the first step.

Bryan Woods:

And I, even recently on my travels, saw lots of ways that people use community spaces. And the location of our building and the size of the property, I think it just lends itself to being somewhere people want to gather. So, I think that's going to be an interesting thing to figure out is what all are we going to do with it?

Bryan Woods:

Now, it's being set up in a way that we have nice connectivity to the surrounding area. We're working on a plan now to, hopefully, connect it into Mabel Clare Thomas Park. So, you start to build this whole area. We're, obviously, looking at 1207, which will be the new home of Economic Development, Visit College Station, Compete College Station.

Jay Socol:

That's the building just to the south of this current building.

Bryan Woods:

Right, the old fire station. And we, currently, rent space, but bringing them onto this site. So, it's creating that kind of campus feel, that community plaza feel, where I'd love to see events in the future, whether it's food trucks, or just families out utilizing the park space I think there are a lot of ideas that I've heard already. Community garden, or are we going to have a market days, or things like that, that this will all allow for. Again, on weekends where we're not full from an office perspective, we've got parking lots and we've got facilities that we can make use of for the community. So, I think it's going to be a really interesting thing that, hopefully, develops over time and really becomes a hub. And, I mean, one of the best locations in the city.

Jay Socol:

You have a ballpark of when you hope that we move in there? Or at least when we have some kind of a grand opening event, is that coming into focus yet?

Bryan Woods:

I do. I will say the construction manager in me is always nervous to talk about any dates, especially because we've just seen so much impact recently due to rain and everything. But the initial goals were to be in spring of next year. I'd love to be in closer to the end of this year. And I think everybody on the team is working towards that. And every month that goes by that we make progress and we don't get delayed, I think that's what we're shooting for.

Bryan Woods:

But it's going to be around there. And whenever it is, one of the first things we're going to do is open it up to the public to kind of not only just do a grand opening, but really give people an opportunity to go in and see it and understand what the capabilities are. So, hopefully, it's not just a situation of saying, "Oh, this is a really pretty building, and I'm glad we have a great city hall," but they're thinking about, "How do I use this? How can I make this work for whatever group I'm involved with, or whatever program I might want to see happen?"

Jay Socol:

So, you and I are recording this just ahead of the Memorial Day weekend. Texas A&M is welcoming its new president M. Katherine Banks. Do you know President Banks? Have you met her?

Bryan Woods:

I don't.

Jay Socol:

So, as city manager, how important is it to establish that relationship, as well as continue your relationship building with A&M System officials?

Bryan Woods:

I think it's absolutely critical. And in my time here the A&M System, and the university have always been incredibly welcoming, and been willing to help on projects. Whether it's meeting with the chancellor or the former president, I mean, I'm excited about the new president. Obviously, you can't help but be excited about having an engineer, especially someone of her caliber in that position. So, it's exciting for me and, more so than anything, it's one of the really incredible things about being in College Station and in my position is you're able to work with people, and utilize resources that cities of our size don't normally have.

Bryan Woods:

I mean, to have a tier one university, and to have the caliber of people that lead that university and that system. And them willing to help you, and work on things with you to make the community one of the best college communities in the country is outstanding. So, it's incredibly important. It's also really important to me that as a city, we're doing everything we can to support their mission. And when they have a lot of pull and can do lots of things on their own, but there are definitely times where we're able to help. And the relationship between us and them has been there from the start.

Bryan Woods:

And so, what I see as part of my job is to help shepherd that, and make sure that we're doing everything we can on our side to make them successful because that's what's going to make us and everybody around us successful.

Jay Socol:

Yeah.

Jay Socol:

So, I know you quietly work with your counterpart in the City of Bryan, Kean Register, on a lot of things. So, first question, who looks better in a uniform?

Bryan Woods:

So, I would love to say me because I think in the dress uniforms I love Navy dress blues. But Kean is a very accomplished soldier, so he has a much more decorated uniform than I do. So, I think if you were going to ask anybody, he probably beats me pretty handily on that.

Jay Socol:

Okay, okay, okay. Well, no, seriously, you have a pretty open dialogue with both Kean, and with Brazos County Judge, Duane Peters. So, how helpful has that been to your time here?

Bryan Woods:

Yeah, I mean, I can't overstate how helpful it is and how great those two guys... and also, I should probably include Jerry Strawser from A&M in there, too. And there's a whole list of people that I could name. But especially with Kean and the judge their depth of knowledge of the community, and I think their desire to make things work is incredible. And getting to spend time with them. And if you're someone in my position who grew up in Texas and, certainly, spent a lot of time in College Station because my dad was an instructor at the fire school. I know of it but you don't have the history like those guys do. And they've been doing things that helped shape this community for a long time.

Bryan Woods:

So, it's incredible to have them as a resource. And I think you said it, but having the honest open dialogue with people in our positions is absolutely crucial because there's a line that divides College Station from Bryan from a practical sense on a map. And we all exist in Brazos County and we're all in the Brazos Valley, but the reality is, is the citizens everywhere depend upon us to make things work. And we work with each other on, on so many different items to make things work the right way without a thought of, hey, this is which side of the line it's on.

Bryan Woods:

And, ultimately, our successes, whether that's economic development, tourism, just general governance, they're going to bring successes for the City of Bryan and Brazos and vice versa. So, while we have our own entities that we work for, I think we are all heavily committed to making things work for the community as a whole. And then, also supporting our governing bodies, and helping them do that because that's the charge that they give us is, "Hey, we have to make this stuff work for everybody."

Jay Socol:

Yeah. Okay, final question coming, you have an amazing family. Your wife, Elizabeth, is clearly the brains of the household.

Bryan Woods:

100%.

Jay Socol:

Next will be Maggie, closely followed by Brady.

Bryan Woods:

Right.

Jay Socol:

So my question is, what do your kids think that you do?

Bryan Woods:

Yeah, that's interesting. I think if you got them in, they would give a good answer. Earlier on in their lives, or I guess first of all, they didn't really have a great concept. They just knew I built things. As they got a little bit older. I think they kind of understood and, probably to their chagrin, understood a little more than maybe other people in their age range. So, they had a higher understanding of local governance, and not always the most interesting topic in the elementary school lunchroom.

Bryan Woods:

Now, I think they are almost as much a typical citizen as anybody, where they will literally... I mean, I got home last night and Brady was asking me, "Well, how was council?" And I said, "It went well." And he said, "Well, what issues were you guys talking about?" So, we had a little chat about-

Jay Socol:

And Brady's how old?

Bryan Woods:

Brady's 11.

Jay Socol:

Okay, all right.

Bryan Woods:

He's 11, and Maggie's 8. And so, we will talk about those things.

Bryan Woods:

And then I say, they're like typical citizens because they also critique what I am doing well, and maybe what they feel like I should be doing better. They will ask questions about, "Well, why are we doing this? Or why can't we do that?" And I won't divulge which one it was, but I have definitely been asked on numerous occasions, "Well, aren't you the city manager, can't you do something about that?"

Jay Socol:

I have a hunch, which one that was.

Bryan Woods:

Yeah, so. But it's great. I mean, I you're right. And I'll just say, from a personal perspective, they were incredible throughout this last year. I mean, you don't realize until you go do something like this what you're asking of your family and, for that matter, the people that you work with. And, in my case, my bosses, and the council, and others that you mentioned here, the way the community supports you when you do something like that is incredible.

Bryan Woods:

But I would also say that I think I get an equal and similar amount of support in the role I have here. It takes a lot of time and energy, and there has to be a lot of understanding from your family when something is going on with the city that you need to deal with that it's not a nine to five job that you can just set it aside. So, to me, it's more important and a better thing that they do understand some of what

we're doing from a local government standpoint. And why we're doing it, so that when I have to go, or I have to be gone, they know it's for a good reason.

Jay Socol:

So, any parting thoughts?

Bryan Woods:

No, I mean, I would just say excited to be back. And, certainly, I'm appreciative of everything that everyone did for me while I was gone and the support. I mean, I think we're a community known for, certainly, supportive of the military and the veterans. But beyond that, I was just amazed to see how the community pulled together through what has to be one of the most difficult challenges that you can go through as a person, and as a community.

Bryan Woods:

And it was hard in some ways to be away from it, because if you want to be a city manager, and want to be in these roles to not be able to be there physically, and feel like you can help with these challenges was tough. But, at the same time, just, again, incredible to watch people across the community find new ways to do things, help each other and face, again, as tough a challenge as there is. So, I'm excited to be back and just try to catch up, and get back to a level where I can be helpful.

Jay Socol:

Cool. Bryan, thanks a bunch.

Bryan Woods:

Yeah, thanks Jay.

Jay Socol:

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