

What's Up, College Station?

Transcript (Season 4, Sp. 22)

Grace Hallowell: Welcome to College Station. I'm Grace Hallowell, and today I'm joined by Deputy City Secretary Ian Whittenton. Hi, Ian.

Ian Whittenton: Hi, Grace.

Grace Hallowell: Welcome back. It's been a while since you've been on the show, and we have some exciting things to talk about regarding how our residents can get engaged with their local government. To kick things off, tell us a little bit about yourself and what you do.

Ian Whittenton: My name is Ian Whittenton, and I'm the Deputy City Secretary for the City Secretary's Office. The City Secretary's Office is a position appointed by the City Council. In my role, I work with ordinances and resolutions, ensure documents get filed online, work with citizens who have questions about open records, and help our vital statistics division. I wear a lot of different hats, and I really enjoy it.

Grace Hallowell: Yes, it is a position that we are grateful for. Speaking of the City Council, we will discuss an opportunity for those interested in running for office in the future. Before we get into that, what is one thing you wish more residents knew about your department or area of expertise?

Ian Whittenton: One thing I wish citizens knew about my department is that we are a great resource to reach out to if you do not know where else to go. We have a lot of institutional knowledge about what happens in each division, and we can get you to the right people, hopefully the first time. I would tell any citizen, if you have a question and do not know exactly where to go, reach out to us first and we will help you out.

Grace Hallowell: Yes, and definitely stop into City Hall. I know when I first moved here, I did not have the slightest clue where things were or how the city operated. I stepped into City Hall, and it was a great experience and learning opportunity for me as a new resident. What is your favorite thing about your job?

Ian Whittenton: My favorite thing is probably interacting with people, answering their questions, and seeing them get what they need with less hassle than they expected. A lot of information is already available to them. Our staff is happy to speak directly with citizens about their questions, which often surprises people. I think they expect a process that is much more formal or difficult, so surprising them with helpful service is probably my favorite part of the job.

Grace Hallowell: What is your background? What made you get into city work and public service in the first place?

Ian Whittenton: I started working at the police department in dispatch. From there, I transitioned to utility customer service, where we handled billing audits and I spent time on the phones. Later, I saw an internal posting on the city website for a Records Management Administrator position. I moved over to the City Secretary's Office for that role and served in it for many years. When our former City Secretary, Sherry Mashburn, left, the Deputy City Secretary, Tanya Smith, ascended to that position and asked me to move up to her previous role as Deputy. That is how I got to where I am today. I am as surprised as anyone because I didn't initially realize this was a career path someone could have. When you think about it, it is obvious that someone needs to do this type of work, but I just never thought it would be me.

Grace Hallowell: I feel like that is a common story among the city employees we have on the show. They start in one position and move up to something they never saw themselves doing, but they possess the heart of a public servant and want to help our residents. College Station is more than just a great place to live; it is a great place to work, with multiple opportunities available. What you do impacts our residents greatly from a behind-the-scenes role. Can you expand on how your work helps our residents?

Ian Whittenton: One of our main responsibilities is posting agendas and distributing information for public meetings, ensuring that all legal timelines are strictly followed. We also handle Public Information Act requests by fulfilling them or monitoring the process to ensure departments respond on time. We answer internal and external questions regarding where to file requests, how long they will take, and what formats are available. Additionally, we handle vital statistics, such as birth and death records, which are essential services. We have transitioned this into an online process, which was fairly new at the time. Those are a few of the areas where we directly impact residents.

Grace Hallowell: From a historical records perspective, your office was also a big help with our history book. It surprised me just how many records the city keeps, especially when it comes to history, photos, and newspaper clippings.

Ian Whittenton: Project Hold is an initiative where the records are kept outside of our legally mandated retention schedules. It is a project where the city invests time into archiving local history. Kimmi previously managed that project, and now Nicole Cross is in that position, doing a fantastic job. When citizens reach out about historical records, they speak with Nicole. She works with various segments of the community; for instance, a neighborhood recently initiated an oral history project where they interview residents,

transcribe the records, and provide them to us to host on Project Hold. This collaboration multiplies the impact of her work by involving community members who share a passion for archiving history.

Grace Hallowell: Switching gears to the Council 101 event, what is City Council 101 and why was the program created?

Ian Whittenton: The City Secretary's Office is heavily involved in elections. We ensure they are conducted properly, all laws are followed, and candidates file their paperwork correctly. Council 101 is our way of reaching out to prospective candidates to provide a heads-up on what they need to know before or after they file. It serves as an opportunity for first contact and provides crucial information about what it takes to run and serve.

Grace Hallowell: Who should consider attending this event?

Ian Whittenton: Anyone considering applying or filing for candidacy should absolutely attend. I highly recommend it. We provide an information packet to everyone who comes. However, you do not have to be completely certain about running; you can attend just out of curiosity. You will learn a lot about what it is like to hold public office and how local government functions.

Grace Hallowell: What do you hope attendees take away from the seminar?

Ian Whittenton: Probably a realistic understanding of the significant time commitment dedicated to public service. Our City Council meets every two weeks. On the alternating weeks, we issue a comprehensive agenda packet. This means every single week you are either reviewing detailed information or attending a meeting. The agenda packets have recently ranged from 750 to 1,000 pages, which is a massive amount of information to digest in the week leading up to a meeting. The time commitment put in by elected officials deserves a lot of respect.

Grace Hallowell: Why is it important for residents to understand how local government works before deciding to run for office?

Ian Whittenton: The time commitment is immense. Reviewing all that data, formulating questions, and preparing for meetings requires substantial effort. Most council members take extensive notes and coordinate with city staff beforehand to clarify contracts or specific actions. Our elected officials care deeply about doing the right thing for the city and invest a lot of time into understanding each issue individually. Beyond council meetings and agenda packets, elected officials are also appointed to external committees, boards, and commissions, which require additional meeting attendance. You are obligated to bring the information learned in those external meetings back to the council and the

public. There is not a single week where a council member does not put in several hours for the city. Understanding that obligation helps ensure candidates know exactly what they are stepping into, so they do not feel overwhelmed.

Grace Hollowell: What are the qualifications for running for City Council?

Ian Whittenton: You must be a resident of the City of College Station for at least one year and be a registered voter.

Grace Hollowell: The ballots open in November. Which positions will be up for election?

Ian Whittenton: We are scheduled to have elections for Place 1, Place 2, and the mayor.

Grace Hollowell: It is an important election year with multiple spots open. Can you walk us through the timeline for someone interested in becoming a candidate?

Ian Whittenton: If you want to become a candidate, the first step is to attend Council 101. The second step is to review the application packet we provide and examine the necessary paperwork. The filing period opens on July 18th, and you can file in person at our office. The filing deadline is August 17th at 5 p.m. at our office.

Grace Hollowell: What are some key responsibilities of a mayor or council member that people might not realize?

Ian Whittenton: People often see only the main council meetings, but officials are also assigned to various other committees and boards they must attend. Additionally, they are frequently invited to community events, such as community center grand openings, where residents appreciate seeing their elected leaders. Council members and the mayor are also commonly asked to speak at public events, which requires taking time out of their day to prepare thoughts and deliver presentations. It truly takes a person with a strong desire for public service to manage it all.

Grace Hollowell: What are some of the most rewarding aspects of serving in local government?

Ian Whittenton: Making a tangible difference and representing your community's voice. When people vote, they look for someone who embodies their values, and you get to be that voice. That is incredibly rewarding. If you have the time and the desire to step into that role, it is a great thing.

Grace Hollowell: What are some potential challenges that candidates might face?

Ian Whittenton: Managing the campaign itself is a challenge, including decisions around fundraising, debates, and forums. There is also mandatory paperwork. While it isn't overly

difficult, there are strict legal deadlines. For example, all elected officials and candidates are now legally required to file a Personal Financial Statement. Many people do not realize they have to disclose their personal finances. That document becomes public record; while we do not email it out, anyone can come into our office to review it.

Grace Hallowell: Why is it so important for candidates to understand these requirements before beginning their campaign?

Ian Whittenton: Nobody likes to face unexpected surprises along the way or find themselves in a position where they suddenly regret their choice. This seminar helps them understand the reality of the role. For many, it affirms their decision to run, while others may decide to step back, watch the process play out, and perhaps jump in later. Either way, knowing what you are getting into is beneficial.

Grace Hallowell: To remind everyone, when and where is the Council 101 event taking place?

Ian Whittenton: Council 101 will take place on June 16th at 6:00 p.m. in the Bush 4141 community room, located downstairs here at City Hall.

Grace Hallowell: Will there be opportunities for attendees to ask questions and interact with city staff?

Ian Whittenton: Yes, absolutely. We break up the information so attendees can ask questions at the end of each section. There will be representatives presenting from the City Secretary's Office, the City Attorney's Office, and the City Manager's Office to offer guidance and perspective.

Grace Hallowell: If someone is on the fence about attending, what is your elevator pitch?

Ian Whittenton: Don't be shy. We do have a registration form online just so we can gauge attendance and prepare the room, but if you don't register and simply want to show up at the door that day, we will welcome you in. We hope to inform and entertain you.

Grace Hallowell: As we mentioned, this is an election year. Why is voter registration such an important part of the local election process?

Ian Whittenton: Being registered ahead of time makes the process much smoother when you arrive at the polls. If you aren't registered, it requires a completely different process. I encourage everyone to register early to make voting easier and ensure you receive the correct ballot based on your address. It is quick and easy to do.

Grace Hallowell: What are some of the most common questions residents have about voter registration?

Ian Whittenton: Usually, people ask if they are registered and where they are registered. The Texas Secretary of State's website features a tool where you can verify your voter status and registration location using basic information like your name and date of birth. It takes seconds, and we use that exact same system to qualify our candidates.

Grace Hallowell: Are there important deadlines that voters should keep in mind?

Ian Whittenton: October 5th is the final day to register to vote for the upcoming election. You can do it right from your phone today, so I highly encourage everyone to take care of it now rather than waiting for the deadline.

Grace Hallowell: What options are available for residents who need assistance with registration?

Ian Whittenton: They can reach out to the county. [Brazos Votes](#) is the official county website, which provides information on all elections in Brazos County and offers registration assistance.

Grace Hallowell: How can residents find information about early voting and Election Day polling locations?

Ian Whittenton: Our city website provides info regarding our specific polling locations and ballot details. Additionally, [Brazos Votes](#) covers the entire Brazos Valley, listing all polling places. Brazos County utilizes vote centers, which means if you live in College Station but work in Bryan, you can cast your ballot at any voting center in the county. It is incredibly convenient because you are not restricted to a single polling place near your home.

Grace Hallowell: That was a new concept for me when I moved to Texas from Pennsylvania, where you are strictly required to vote at the specific polling place assigned to your address. Having options definitely makes it easier. Why is participation in local elections especially important?

Ian Whittenton: It is important for everyone to have a stake in the process. By participating in an election, you select someone to represent your values without having to run for office yourself. Voting gives everyone a chance to have some skin in the game.

Grace Hallowell: Very well said. Before we go, we have a quick lightning round of questions. Just say the first thing that comes to mind. Are you ready?

Ian Whittenton: Yes, I'm ready.

Grace Hallowell: Early voting or Election Day voting?

Ian Whittenton: Early voting.

Grace Hallowell: Coffee before a council meeting or after?

Ian Whittenton: Before.

Grace Hallowell: What is the easiest step residents can take today to be election-ready?

Ian Whittenton: Go check your voter registration status.

Grace Hallowell: What is one quality every effective council member should have?

Ian Whittenton: Curiosity.

Grace Hallowell: Finally, what does public service mean to you?

Ian Whittenton: It means staying engaged and listening to the public. We must always keep in mind that we do this work for the community. Individual efforts and positive attitudes truly make a difference in our town.

Grace Hallowell: Absolutely. Thank you so much for being here today, Ian. One more time, when and where is the Council 101 event?

Ian Whittenton: It is on June 16th at 6 p.m. in the Bush 4141 community room downstairs here at City Hall.

Grace Hallowell: Awesome. And that's what's up.