

Dustin Sweet Mayoral Candidacy Interview

Interview January 3, 2022

Here are excerpts from an interview given while driving the town limits following the New Years eve snowstorm. This has been edited (heavily) for brevity (and swearing).

What is your understanding of economics?

I grew up in a successful small business here in Taos and helped it transition to someone else's ownership so that my parents could retire and I could pursue my dreams out of town. I super did, and I'm super happy about it. During that time I also managed to run a couple of startup businesses into the ground. HA.

Microscale I understand. Money that comes into the economy and money that leaves the economy are the two numbers to watch. It doesn't matter if the bank is hoarding gold if our money from the town is going out. If we spend all our money elsewhere and it doesn't come back then it's not in rotation. Money not in rotation makes for a poor place.

If it's all getting hoarded by the local bank, that's fine, because then they have money to lend and there's cash on hand to do things with. If it's constantly spent out of town, then at the end of the day, we run out. No amount of tourist money is going to save us if our money is going out and not coming back.

Why do you think you'd be good at being mayor?

I don't, haha.

I'm good at seeing responsibilities, delegating authority and making decisions.

Do you think a representational government should be run like a business?

I do not, haha, what a fun question. Taxes are meant to be spent and with a business you want to make money. With representational government, you want to spend the people's money so they get things. We pay taxes to do things like pay for roads, sewer, water, and the police force, fire department and schools for our kids. That money should get spent on those things. You're gonna end up with some administrative costs where you pay the people to make those things happen, and

you shouldn't be concerned about trying to have the business of the government making money. If the business the government becomes making money that becomes fascist real quick.

What do you think the town of Taos' role is within the larger structure of Taos County?

In my experience, the town and the county have been butting heads for most of my adult life and mayor Barone has done a really amazing job of removing a lot of those contentious roadblocks. I mean; for good, or for ill, those roadblocks are gone. I think the town is the namesake of the county and should be the flagship and the jewel of the county of Taos.

What personal questions do you imagine people will ask you or wonder about you?

Oh, man, I have no idea. That's one of my favorite parts about humanity is I have no idea what people think is interesting. The things that I find interesting about life are not the things that other people seem to find interesting. So when people come along and ask me questions about life, I'm almost always interested.

If you had to guess the things that people either already know about you, or, or are wondering about you, that are qualifiers, what do you think those things might be?

Gosh, I don't know. Yeah, I wouldn't want to second guess. I imagine I have an outgoing robust public persona because most people have interacted with me in some way in a public format. I guess I just want to say all the legends are true.

In the world of public life there are lies, damned lies, and the truth. I just want to go on the record saying whatever you've heard is absolutely true. I 100% support whatever anybody's saying about me, that sounds about right.

If you could find a few words to describe the people of Taos who have they been for you?

Educated trades people and lovers of art and poetry.

Similarly if you had to speak to Taos itself, what has Taos been for you?

Taos has been a great teacher to me about what is important in life and how to stay alive out in the world. What is it to be a neighbor? What is it to be a friend? How to be

a good friend, how to be a good sportsman. Almost all my sportsmanship came from my time in Taos. What it was to shake hands, mean what you say and do your best.

We have a lot of kindness in Taos, and acceptance.

I always joke that it's not Taos, it's Taos'. It's multiple.

Taos is about friendship, responsibility, and survival. Both responsibility to yourself and responsibility to your environment, so as to take care of yourself. I think the Acequia Association really says it all and if you're not participating in keeping everyone in town healthy and safe then what are you doing here? We don't need you. It's a cool place to get away from thinking about that stuff but if you're in a position of public power and or you're a local business[wo]man you have to think about those things.

Why are you applying to be mayor?

Enough people told me I should that I decided that I would. It started off as a joke a couple years ago, and then enough people came along and said, "Yeah, actually, you should do that". I feel like if you are going to take any kind of umbrage with the way people are running things, you should probably throw your name in the hat.

Public service is one of those things that almost anyone can do. If you're upset with how things are run, you think you can run it better, you have a problem with it, then you've got to participate in the system. The thing I love about America is that it's participatory. I reap a lot of the benefits of being an American. Participate.

I think I want to run for mayor, I don't think I want to be the mayor. Being the mayor sounds like a lot of work and I'm risk averse in that category. I have a great job here in Taos. All I gotta do is keep my head down and live a great life, raise my kids. But the job needs to be done. It needs to be done by someone who's got all of our interests at heart.

There's a real problem happening, that I see, that has been a problem my entire life in Taos, which is that people from outside of our community move here and they want to change it to be more like where they came from. There's some parts of Taos that just, that's not who we are. In fighting that, I think we bite ourselves in the ass, we don't think about what and who is actually happening to us, we're just like "Oh, outsiders bad". Well, cool.

Walmart's a great example. Right? Like, Walmart came in and killed all of the little businesses that it was preying upon nationally. It did a great job of wrecking em' all. Then the prices magically went up. But the prices went up because they don't have any competition.

In not allowing another big box retailer into Taos, we become a slave to Walmart. Smith's is a similar example, and because of the other grocery stores, we have competitive Kroger prices.

There's a really beautiful part of Taos, which is our agricultural background. We have a rich agricultural history celebrating life in the high desert, and we've got a lot of retired agriculturalists here. It's one of the things that makes UNM Taos great, we've got all this knowledge, and yet it's not being leveraged for practical applications at a large scale.

If we're going to continue to participate in the 21st century, Taos is going to change whether we want to or not. And we're gonna have to lead the way in terms of what that change is. I'm not advocating to put a Target down by Walmart. If it was up to me I'd rather Walmart was still a drive in. Yet we are going to have to participate at that level. To start thinking at that level, like how do we want to see ourselves, not today, but in 10 years? How do we want to be seen by the world, by our children, by ourselves?

A really good example of how we want to be seen is the luminarias on the plaza. Some people really like the old school luminarias. I'm one of those guys, I would much rather pay five people to wander around for two weeks lighting luminarias than I would see electric ones. I think the electric ones suck. It's just a flavor of town. Would you rather have it this old way, or would you rather embrace the new fad.

The other part of that is that our Wi-Fi downtown sucks, we could have a better Wi-Fi connection. We're plugged into the main network. The Wi-Fi could be free, and it could be bad-ass. Those two things, I think, hold themselves together really well.

I believe the way forward is neither the old way or the modern way, but a mix of what works for us. That's how we move forward as Taoseños, that's how our culture comes together. Think of it as the way we do things here. When the way we do things is "to the best of our ability, all the time" all of a sudden excellence shows up.

When you start phoning things in, saying no to things, then the balance becomes off. Toys at the parks stay broken for months on end. You get potholes in the roads that never get fixed because people are worried about job security. Don't worry about that stuff. If we can convince the road department that they're going to have a job, even if the roads are perfect all the time, the roads will be perfect all the time. Like, there's enough bad weather and bad stuff here that those jobs are going to exist. You don't have to manufacture problems.

That's a real thing. I see it from the leadership at the top, at the Nationwide standpoint. From the Bush senior administration, all the way down to the Trump administration slowly eroding people's confidence in elected officials and really focusing on this idea that rugged individualism will save us all. Rugged individualism never built a dam or a road, and it certainly hasn't changed the power industry or navigated world hunger, much less local problems like homelessness and climate change. I think those are things that the town can take a shot at.

Do you feel like there's a flavor of leadership in these times that is important?

I think that we live in a time of strong arm politics, where everyone kind of hopes somebody else is gonna come in and save you. I say that because Marvel movies are big. The idea behind Marvel movies and Superman movies is this stupid idea that someone else is gonna save you. Tony Stark is gonna fly in with his Ironman suit and solve all your problems. The reality is that you are going to solve your problems. In order to do that, you're gonna have to participate. What we have, in terms of residents, in terms of people of Taos, is that a lot of us are retired and a bit worn out by being the problem solvers of the world. That's just not gonna fly. That's not the world we built. Sorry. We're gonna have to build it ourselves.

I think if we take the lead and decide what the future is going to be, we're golden. We have really good people in this town. If we can coordinate stakeholders to see mission success in terms of everyone's success, we're golden.

As long as we're fighting about who gets this or who gets that, or being really worried about whose needs are unmet, I think we'll fail. I think we meet the needs of all the people of Taos real easily if we accept that we're the people of Taos and we have to meet our needs. It's gonna take a potato from your larder, and it's gonna take a little bit of deciding how we want to move forward. I am kind of interested in being part of

that process. Or rather, I'm not afraid of being part of that process. I don't know that I'm interested in it at all.

What do you think is our opportunity in Taos?

This is a trading town built on multiculturalism. Any of us at times come off as having a chip on our shoulder about the other people. I think that at some point that needs to be an outdated mode of thinking about our relationships with each other.

Taos has been a multicultural hub for centuries. On the same coin, one of the things that we do really well is showcase how different cultures can get along together, while remaining different cultures. Taos did a really good job of making the melting pot idea of America really sing for me and really stick out. I think that one of the coolest parts of Taos is guys from the Pueblo, and guys from Romeroville, and guys from California who moved here because their parents took a job, all getting along and playing sports together. All getting along and doing things. I don't mean without conflict. I mean, everybody butts heads, and we all run into cultural differences. We also recognize those, and we come together and we celebrate them together.

One of the things I really love is watching the boys of the high school interact with each other at such a weird level. They're all getting the same dumb amount of information from YouTube and the world, right? Like they're getting all the American information. But then when they're interacting with each other and trying to get dates with the girls and just having that teenage scrum, they make friends in the most beautiful human ways where people with shared interests and shared likes group up for a little while until they can't get along and then they group up with somebody else. Those childish fights are over resources. I'm here to advocate that there's enough resources to go around. So those fights can go away. I think that one of the fun parts of having a job at the high school is showing young men that there's enough resources to go around.

You mentioned earlier about phoning things in, how do you feel like that's happening right now in our town?

Well, if you look at things like the housing crisis or the total trainwreck that is the downtown historic district, Bent, you're looking at funded projects with people running them, that can't get it together to finish the thing because people cannot seem to make a decision. They're punting, regardless of what they want to say or how they

want to talk about it. They're punting, they're not deciding. One of the things that we hire elected representatives for is to decide.

It's real easy to step back and say, "Oh, I'm going to have a life in the public office and so I want to have the correct position on things" but like... shut up man. Make a choice. I didn't elect you to think about it later, go decide. Then like, if I hate your decisions, you'll get fired. It's really straightforward. I don't get it. I don't understand politicians who don't want to do the problem solving part. That's the politics part. I made these decisions and they're rad. It's not "Hey, let's think about this more", it's not "Hey, let's put it off, hey, let's do this thing". I understand the reticence, but I'm not afraid of being wrong, and I'm not afraid of failing. It seems to me like a failure on the part of the elected representatives to get things done is, you know, not getting things done. That's the failure.

What are you afraid of, or what would be a failure to you?

Oh, man, I'm afraid of the dark. Yeah I don't like the dark, and I'm afraid of monsters. Failure at a public office level, for me, would be an unwillingness to listen to my constituents.

Who do you consider yourself as representing? Who are your constituents?

Taosños. If you live here, if you're raising kids here, if this is your town, then I want to know what the problems that you see are and I want to work to solve them.

You know, not all problems have governmental solutions. Many of them do, from a regulatory and from a facilitation standpoint. A lot of the time the government is just the acting authority figure. It's just a yes/no question looking at larger implications and what those questions are. Zoning is a really good example of making choices about what things can happen and where so that people's quality of life gets consistently better.

The elephant in the room, when talking about constituents, is that so many people who work and participate in town life live in the county. I grew up in the extraterritorial zone. The voting landowners of the Town of Taos are not the only people using these resources, but they are the ones voting on how it is run. That is a problem if you want it to be. I see a lot of ideas for solving the issue, from re-using the extraterritorial zone idea, to creating a city by getting the buy-in from our surrounding communities. I

also don't see it as a problem. If you want to put up a grocery store in Talpa, do it. If you want to get a water district going in Hondo or provide sewer services for the west rim I'm all about it. This is Taos and it's expensive to live here. People of all walks of life crowd in at the edges to enjoy the same quality of life as we do and the people who inherited their properties or worked their asses off to buy in here might not want to give that up, and that is okay.

With the kids we talk a lot about affordable mistakes and not affordable mistakes. Where do you draw that line in public office?

I think it becomes things like services. If I had to remove public services, that would be a failure. If the police department closed down on my watch, that would be a public failure.

I believe there's a part of being an elected official, that is listening to your constituency, and figuring out what they want. That's not necessarily the same as doing what they say. If 40 people tell you that they don't like the price of gasoline you can either buy a gasoline distillery, or you can figure out a different transportation method within town.

The blue bus is doing a really amazing job right now supporting the chili line throughout town. It's one of the things that I think we'd like to see more of. Yet, is that the best solution? I don't know that it is, I don't know that it isn't. I know that as we develop the South side of town, there needs to be an easier way to get back and forth. I know that traffic's just gonna get worse as we add more people.

I know that if we don't start calming down in terms of choosing to be in places at particular times, we're gonna have more tailgating and more accidents. I think that one of the things that we could all do as citizens is give the guy in front of you another 40 yards. Calm down about it. Everybody complains about the traffic downtown, but it's bumper to bumper traffic because you're on his ass. Why don't you calm down? Just like let it ride. Nobody wants to hear that. Right? Nobody wants to take responsibility for their own actions, because we all want to show up right on time to the thing that we left the house late for. So how do we combat that? Just taking it easy. How do we take it easy?

You know, people who have large amounts of economic success take it a lot easier than people who don't. I think that one of the things that we haven't discussed is

really the economic disparity of Taos, the town of Taos versus the surrounding county of Taos. I think one of the pieces that's important is you know, there's a real blue collar, white collar difference in this town. Most of the people who are living here with kids have been in the blue collar sector for a long time. We've made this push to be a white collar town with the internet and we're not really taking it up on its opportunity. I don't know entirely how we're going to leverage that but we need to leverage that a little bit more at the public level.

It's interesting because we started talking about these things and I started having answers that are "I don't know", and I want to stay away from that and say things like, "you know, you don't want to say I don't know", but really, I don't know. There are people who do, who live in this town who are accessible, and would want to talk to the mayor. I think that as the mayor, I would talk to those people and then I would find out, and then we get it done. Saying I don't know, I see it more as a superpower than I think the people before me have.

From the perspective of having been a kid here and growing up here, knowing this place the way you do, what do you see are the challenges we face in Taos?

It comes down to like, who's got money and what do they want? From there, you can extrapolate. I think the people who are living here and raising their kids here want the same things I do in terms of being able to leave your kids outside and not worry about them. That the schools will not just be a warm place for my kids to be babysat. But an actual place where they might garner some form of an education. Learn about themselves and maybe even about life a little.

(IS) They put owls up on the Walgreens! So cool. I really thought they were real owls!

Owls run in packs in Taos, you didn't know that?

(IS) I didn't know!

Man that's so many flashing lights up there. This snowstorm is beautiful.

(IS) It really is.

I think there's a real cultural event that people long for, that we don't necessarily have right now. We're the town that voted for a mariachi, and then we were like, "Yeah,

that's fine" for a long time. That's not an accident. Some people are angry about that, and some people aren't, and like, the next guy was really you know, say what you want about Darren - he's a good mariachi! That's what we did for a while. It led to some ramifications that maybe aren't the best for town but then we got a guy who's super into being on the business end.

Barone has done a really good job of, like I said, connecting the town and the county and getting them past the sticking points of the 80s. I think we can't fight about the things that he's decided. I have my own personal feelings about them. The things that I think he's right about and the things that I think he's wrong about, they don't matter, because he made a decision. He moved forward, that's the piece that I think he's done really well with. Regardless of how you feel about those decisions, those decisions have been made and now we have to fight about other stuff.

We have bigger problems on our plate than expanding the airport or not, or calling in part of town or not. If we're going to continue to go with this expansionist idea of creating the city of Taos, then we need to get Arroyo Seco on board, we need to get Ranchos on board. It needs to be an on-board thing and the town has to provide city services. We're not even providing town services right now. There's not a way to walk around downtown easily with your kids. That's ridiculous. There's no sidewalk on Los Pandos. It's dangerous for kids to walk home from high school, they're walking in the street. That's not the town we want to have. We gotta solve our problems as a town before we can move on to being a city. If we want to move on to being a city what are the services we're gonna add to people?

Adding the town sewer and town electricity is great, it's all well and good and it's fun to have more money to play with at a service level. It's also taking from the aquifer and it's pulling from people's ability to make decisions for themselves. You're talking about a lot of growth and expansion that there's plenty of modeling for, lots of cities have done this. Lots of towns have turned into cities over the years there's ways to do this. Nobody so far has been willing to say "eminent domain" and like, get the things in that are the things, and that's what it's gonna take moving forward.

The partnerships with the state and with the county are the things that are going to move us forward as a town towards the city. If we want to do that, then that's one set of decisions. If we want to stay a Town, which personally I do, I think it's better for us to

be a town and for the village of Talpa to be the village of Talpa and for the village of Seco to stay the village of Seco. I think that part of what makes us so wonderful is our smallness. I don't know if that's what people want to do. I see that the current town council and the current mayorship clearly signaling that they want to do that. The town manager looks like he's doing here what he did to Pagosa Springs. Great job. Not a place I want to live.

[sees large snow plow pile] Oh yeah! That's so awesome.

(IS) The John Dunn parking lot has a couple of other fantastic sculptures.

That's so good.

(IS) I haven't seen this since I first got to Taos and even then I don't think it was quite this impressive.

This is what every winter was like growing up here, for like months on end.

Oh and Mayé built a snowman! That's funny. That's a really good example of the plaza. What I like about the plaza is that between Mayé and Taos Mountain Candles, you get this whole gamut of what it is to be a Taoseño. Taos Mountain Candles makes candles here in Taos, that's great! They're also totally full of imported goods, if you're gonna have expensive stuff, let's produce it here.

I think that's one of the problems we run into for the craftspeople of Taos. I'm gonna talk some dirt right now. The craftspeople of Taos are craftsmen and tradesmen, and they care about quality. We're not willing to have a 20 cent shirt, you know, like, we make things that last. If we're going to move forward as being a touristy place then that touristy ristra has got to be a local ristra. It's got to be good. It's got to have that quality to it. We're not selling to each other. It's interesting, one of the things I've noticed growing up here is that the things we sell to each other are all quality things, and useful things. The touristy things that we sell to outsiders are of inferior quality. I think that sends the wrong message. I don't think we should stop selling each other quality things. I think we should just keep making good stuff. Selling good stuff. Part of that becomes expensive, so how do you pay to be here?

How do we support businesses that are going to pay their employees enough to live in Taos. There's this other piece where we have a whole whole working class of people in Taos, that don't live in town, they live in the county. We have a big housing problem too. We're not doing well by our kitchens and our wait staff and our river guides and our ski lift operators and we need to solve some of those problems. Those are solvable problems, "they" are us. If we can't take care of each other what are we even doing out here?

Funny one of the big examples I have of that is, concerts in the park are a great idea right? Fencing the park off so local kids can't play there on days that the concerts are happening, that sucks. If we're gonna have concerts in the park and people are gonna pay to come here we should probably not fence the whole thing off. That changes the way we deal with tickets and that changes the way we deal with having those experiences. We need to change and have those be different things because we can do better.

Any other questions? I feel like I've been talking forever.

In what ways do you see your personal life coloring your decisions going into office?

Oh, I've made crazy life decisions that other people will think are immoral or irresponsible at the very least. I'm here for a good time. I think that being alive is fun and I'm out for a good time.

There's a quality of acceptance and togetherness that I'll end up bringing to a job that is trying to get a yes for everything. "You can't have a yes for everything" is an idea that needs to die. I'm not trying to be communist about it. Where the rubber hits the road is where decisions have to be made in terms of what's real and what's not, and how we allocate resources.

Everybody's needs get on the list. I'm willing to see that everybody gets their needs met and really converse about what those needs are. I find that most people, when they state a need, what they're really stating is a feeling. As we work in tandem, as we work in public to solve problems together, what I find to be a useful tool is to find out what the real problems are, and then find solutions from there. A lot of the time people will have concerns that are actually a symptom of an underlying problem. There are hardships in Taos that are symptoms of the economic disparity we're

suffering through right now. Once we solve the underlying conditions, we can smooth out the little problems later.

Do you have any concerns about you being mayor?

I piss off a lot of people just by being alive and being myself. I'm perfectly willing to piss them off in a public capacity as well. Like I said, I like life.

I made personal decisions about who I love and where I went to school and how I do things that challenge a lot of people. I think my partners are going to be upset with the public degree with which people get involved in our personal life. I think my daughters will be upset at me for time spent away from home. I think that my students will be upset at the lack of me in the classroom. I think there's a lot of things that could go wrong for me personally being mayor and that's one of the reasons that I don't want the job and will probably only run for one term.

My only real concern is that other's challenges with my lifestyle would lead to missed opportunities to dialogue about the future of the town. That would be a shame.