

Transcript for The City Speak Podcast Season 3, Bonus Episode, “Partner Podcast: Center of Everywhere with Dave Unmacht”

[The City Speak podcast theme music begins]

Adriana Temali-Smith:

Hey everyone, it's Adriana from The City Speak. I wanted to let you know that today we're bringing a special treat to your ears. This is a podcast from our partners [podcast theme music fades out] at the Center for Rural Policy and Development, and it's an episode of their podcast which is called the Center of Everywhere that features our very own executive director from the League of Minnesota Cities, Dave Unmacht. We wanted to share it with you, and we hope you'll like it.

[Center of Everywhere podcast theme music begins]

Podcast Announcer:

Welcome to the Center of Everywhere podcast, where we explore stories of rural Minnesotans who are making a difference in their communities. Rural isn't in the middle of nowhere. It is in the center of everywhere.

Kelly Asche:

Hello, welcome to episode nine [podcast theme music fades out] of the Center of Everywhere podcast. I'm Kelly Asche, research associate at the Center for Rural Policy and Development. And in this episode, we'll be talking with Dave Unmacht. Dave is the executive director of the League of Minnesota Cities, and he'll be sharing his thoughts on the challenges and opportunities facing Minnesota's small towns, how uncertainty will be the defining characteristic of the next five years, and why getting involved in local government may just be the best thing you ever do in life.

Julie Tesch:

Welcome to the Center of Everywhere podcast. My name is Julie Tesch, and I am the president and CEO of the Center for Rural Policy and Development. We're very excited today to have with us Dave Unmacht, who is the executive director for the League of Minnesota Cities. Why don't you tell our listeners a little bit about the League of Minnesota Cities and also about yourself?

Dave Unmacht:

As Julie said, my name is Dave Unmacht. I'm the League of Minnesota Cities executive director. I've been in this position for five years on August 1st, so just five years and a couple months. My background is in local government. I've been in local government in Minnesota for about 35 years or thereabouts. I've worked in city government, county government. I've done, uh, some consulting work in local government. And now I work for the League of Minnesota Cities, it's ... which is a- a statewide association of cities.

So, there are 833 members in the League. We're the largest, um, city-based association in the state. There are several others that are our affiliates. There's the Coalition of Greater Minnesota Cities, Metropolitan Cities, and then their Minnesota Association of Small Cities. And we work very closely with all of those entities uh on behalf of uh our cities in the state.

The League's office in St. Paul. We do a variety of things, Julie. We do advocacy in St. Paul, primarily, although we do some work in Washington. It's harder there, obviously. We, uh, do communications, we do research, we answer a lot of questions cities have about anything from their budget to HR issues, to legal issues. We have a- a- a bunch of staff attorneys that provide support and help to, uh, our- our cities. We put on training and conferences. And then, finally we have, uh, insurance side of our business. We do property casualty and workers' compensation insurance for our cities.

So, uh, kind of an all-purpose, member-based association here in Minnesota. Just as a- a coincidental fact, there are 49, uh, s- municipal leagues in the country. And the only state that doesn't have one is Hawaii because there aren't enough cities in Hawaii, uh, to form a league. Um, so it's- it's a great job. It's a wonderful organization. And I like to work on behalf of, uh, all the cities in the state.

Julie Tesch:

Very good. You said there's 833 cities that are members. How many of those do you think are- are rural cities — that you would describe as rural?

Dave Unmacht:

So, there are actually 853 cities in the state. 20 cities-

Julie Tesch:

Oh, fift- ... Okay.

Dave Unmacht:

... are not members, but they are very small, very, very small. Um, I couldn't even name them, uh, candidly. Well, the majority of our cities are going to be in the rural area because I think we have, um ... I- I'm just ... Best guess here, you know, roughly 100 cities in the Metropolitan area, plus or minus. So, that would leave, uh, you know, 700 or 700-plus that are in, uh, rural Minnesota. That counts, um, you know, of course the entire state outside of the Twin Cities, Metropolitan area. Uh, that would mean obviously St. Cloud, Rochester, and Duluth and so forth would be counted in the, in the rural category. They have their mini metropolitan regions there, obviously, with communities around them. But the majority of our cities, Julie, are under 10,000. In fact, a significant percent of our cities are under 5,000. So, both rural and small make up, uh, big bulk of our members.

Julie Tesch:

And I know you have been a gracious host, uh, to our organization, to the Center for Rural Policy and Development in the past months here, allowing us to have a board meeting in your, in your office building in St. Paul when we'd been there, uh, at the Capitol. So, uh, it's- it's a great building relationship and working with your staff. I want to ask you, you know, the country is facing several crisis points right now, and we- we hear about it all the time in the news. But some are more concentrated in rural areas. From your perspective, what are you seeing out there?

Dave Unmacht:

Yeah. You know, it's interesting, this ... starting this week and going into the next month, uh, s- several representatives of the League — myself included, my deputy, Luke Fisher, some executive committee members and- and a few staff members — are going to be ... uh, going out and meeting with our city officials across the state. We have meetings scheduled in all sectors of our state and we're going to learn firsthand what some of the immediate issues are. We can easily speculate based on what we know and what we hear.

Uh, our- our- our rural areas in our small cities, uh, were ... you know, are struggling. And- and- and- and let me qualify that very carefully. You see, not everyone is. I mean, there are very different levels of- of,

uh, of how would you define success in a small city or what their status is? You could have a small city that's doing really well in a neighbor that isn't, or a- a city of 5,000 that's highly successful and one that's 6,000, that's struggling.

So, I- I want to make sure that your listeners, uh, know I'm- I'm offering some generalizations and not anything unique to one particular community or one particular area because there's no question, they're very distinct in our state. And- and that's part of the a- allure and part of the attraction, but also part of the challenge because not everybody's in the same kind of state. But overall, let's just accept for a moment, not just in Minnesota, but across the country, that our rural ar- ... rural areas are challenged.

You know, they're challenged. And what are they ... Some of the significant challenges that they have are to retaining jobs, keeping students that graduated from high school to, uh, stay in their community. You know, if they go off to college, many of them don't come back. How do you find jobs? How do you find economic development? How do you strengthen Main Street? Main Street isn't just the- the street name and the, and the businesses o- on that street, but it's uh economic development and jobs, the small manufacturing employment that makes up a lot of what rural Minnesota has.

Uh, and- and there's just a lot of, a lot of circumstances that are challenging our- our small city leaders in our rural areas that are- are hard to, hard to figure out. There's just no magic elixir or no kind of solution that you can find that will fix everything. It's- it's really difficult. They're very challenging. They've been going on for a long time. And unfortunately, the ... kind of the recent experience of COVID and the pandemic has just exasperated some of those challenges. And so we're looking forward to going out and listening to our- our members and our fellow city officials to hear how they're doing, hear more specifically about some of the major concerns they have now, and offer our support and help as best we can.

Julie Tesch:

That sounds great. I'm sure that will be very interesting conversation. Again, like you said, given COVID and given ... uh, hopefully, there will be a bonding bill coming up. I know, um ... I live near a very small town and, uh ... of Waldorf in Southern Minnesota and thinking of infrastructure, um, we ... the town is tore up, and we're quite happy about it actually, because that means we're getting a new sewer system and wastewater system. Um, and it's a long time coming. And I know we're one of many very small towns that are facing that. Uh, uh, d- ... What are you seeing infrastructure-wise? You know, before- before you go out and listen to people, what- what are you hearing infrastructure-wise?

Dave Unmacht:

So, you mentioned something that's really important. And I knew we'd touch on the legislation and kind of the legislative uncertainty and what's happening there. We certainly can talk about that as much as you'd like, uh, 'cause that's- that's a big issue, especially with no bonding bill this session. You know, as your listeners likely know, or may know, um, the- the state Legislature, the governor, and the state Legislature, generally speaking, adopt a bonding bill every two years.

Now, sometimes there's a supplemental bonding bill that may happen, uh, on an off year, but typically, there's a bonding bill anywhere between \$500 million and \$2 billion, or somewhere in there, where they invest in the infrastructure of our state. That includes, uh, things such as the zoos that we have, that includes our universities all over the state, not just the Minneapolis campus, Duluth, et cetera, et cetera. But, and this is maybe the most important point for your listeners, is that it also invests in infrastructure in our, in our small cities, in our rural areas there is so very important.

What I mean by that is uh water lines, sewer lines, streets, and roads. Th- the basic foundation of what a city does, and the basic foundation that makes up a community is the, is the health and welfare, and infrastructure is part of that. And unfortunately, many of our rural areas and our small cities have aging

infrastructure, meaning that the pipes that were put down were put down many, many years ago, decades ago, in fact. And they're wearing out, they're breaking down.

And these communities don't have the ability to fund them on their own. They need help. They need help from the state, federal government, regional entities, wherever they can. And that's really an important consideration. And we hear that all the time. And I've known that for a long time, is that, is that how do we fund and- and- and help these cities that need basic improvements, let alone some of the other things they might want to do to make it an attractive place to live?

So that's a challenge and that's a conversation we know we're going to have. And we continue to express that both to our federal delegation and our state delegation, uh, is, uh, let's- let's provide support and help for the ins- infrastructure. It could be a water tower, you know, it could be anything related to that. So, that's so very important. And I'm good ... It's good- good to hear that your community and Waldorf is- is doing that because I think investing in those are really important to the future of our cities.

Julie Tesch:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Uh, I know that our local legislators, over the years, have been very helpful and USDA, and i- it's taken a long time. It has taken a long time, but, um, i- it's- it's going to be wonderful because it was beyond, um ... the infrastructure was beyond old. It was, um, Minnesota Pollution Control coming in and saying, "You have to fix this, or, you know, we're shutting you down," basically. So, we have a mayor right now who is really proactive on trying to get some small businesses to town. And without proper infrastructure, that's not going to happen.

Dave Unmacht:

Right. No, that's right. You know, the- the-

Julie Tesch:

Yeah.

Dave Unmacht:

... challenge of course is- is- is i- in order to grow, thrive, and survive. You have to invest, you have to spend, you have to build, you have to do something. And that's the hard part because where does that money come from? And it only comes from, you know, yourselves, the taxpayers, the citizens. But if you don't do it, you know you won't survive in the long run or you won't, you won't thrive, or more importantly, Julie, you won't compete.

You know, if you're ... If you won't compete for what you need to compete for, which is, uh, dollars, investments, people, businesses, and so forth, um ... You know, the- the people make choices about where they want to live and where they want to spend the money, and where they wanna invest in a business. And- and the communities, the community support, community, um, interest, community, uh, willingness, that's all a consideration.

So, it's just, it's just, you know, the chicken and the egg sort of thing. Um, but for, what ifs, you know. And that ... those are the big questions that face rural and small city leaders all over our state is, do we take that risk? And if so, how much and what- what may it mean to our community without any easy answers?

Julie Tesch:

Absolutely. You know, I think of- of our little town, we were, um, incorporated a little over 100 years ago. And I think of maybe back in the '50s, you know, when the infrastructure was really being laid down, the foresight that those people had, that those leaders had. And, you know, we're- we're doing infrastructure now, not necessarily ... yes, for ourselves, but more for the future, like you said, having that foresight. And

thinking about that and not knowing, but without it, you're not going to move forward. So, um, you know, we're at a time now where, uh, citizens have to step up and think about, think about that future.

Dave Unmacht:

Well, let's touch on something that would be easily answerable in a question, but that's ... now, here's the future, it's all about technology and broadband and investment in internet. Um, that's- that's so critical.

Julie Tesch:

Great minds think alike. That's what I was just going to talk about.

Dave Unmacht:

So critical. And we- we support the- the broadband legislation at the state and the federal level where our rural communities can get the same level of service that other communities have in metropolitan areas or in other areas. It's- it's very interesting. I certainly don't have a picture of the map in my, in my, in my mind, but I know that if you look at a map of- of the technology strength, I'll call it, which isn't the technical word, but it's a practical word of where that, uh, where that access is. It's all over the board. It's all over the country, all over the board, right?

And so trying to fill those gaps for our small communities is a high priority. And it's just ... I call it the future success of the communities. If you don't have technology or your internet speed, you don't stay there. You know, kids can't, kids can't compete, jobs can't compete. So it's not a matter of ... It's not an option, it's a matter of survival. And- and there's no reason why any one place or any one-

Julie Tesch:

Yeah.

Dave Unmacht:

... territory should be different than any place else. It all ought to be the same level of speed and same level of capacity. And of course, the issue is, who pays for it and the investment? And if you have a community neighborhood in a suburban city or in a bigger city, let's just take Mankato, for example, you know, the private sector can put that line down and charge people for the access and the- the use of it and recoup their money. But if you put a line down on the country and, you know, you know, who do you ... who's paying for that, right? I mean, there's a cost to it. So I've heard people compare it to the electrical grid that was put down in the, in the early 1900s.

Julie Tesch:

Yes.

Dave Unmacht:

And should broadband be that same principle. That's a policy question that others are debating, but that's the essence of the future is ...

Julie Tesch:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dave Unmacht:

... you know, your little city and all those other little cities years ago were- were serviced by cars and tractors and people driving into town to do business with grain and- and groceries and lunch-

Julie Tesch:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dave Unmacht:

... and et cetera, et cetera. Well, w- with that slowing up now, and with technology becoming a prominent infrastructure, it just changes the whole dynamic of the small cities. And then if they don't have that infrastructure, that even makes it worse for them and it becomes unfair.

Julie Tesch:

Absolutely. You know, I think of, uh ... It's really being shown during the pandemic, especially with broadband and with internet accessibility. There- there's haves and have nots, and, and there's ... It's in the Metro areas as well. There's pockets that don't have the "broadband" and the map you were talking about. Um, you know, there's a few maps out there depending upon, you know, what your upload and download speeds are, you know.

Here, I have decent internet. I'm very fortunate today that, uh, video was working well; we have a good stream. It's a nice day out. But when there's a snow storm or a, uh, a thunderstorm or something, it can be a little questionable. Now, I'm on satellite, and that works best for us out here. But. you know, you go maybe five miles to the south, you're in a different county and they are going to have fiber to their farms.

Dave Unmacht:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Julie Tesch:

And that's just because of investment from pri- private industry, a private company.

Dave Unmacht:

Yeah.

Julie Tesch:

So it is really spotty. But I'm hoping that people working at home or, and- and students having to, uh, be at school remotely, that, hopefully, we can get this figured out, and- and do like a rural electrification in the future.

Dave Unmacht:

Are you Blue Earth County?

Julie Tesch:

Um, I am Waseca County. I am right in the corner of ... in Waseca County. So, uh, just south of us is Faribault County.

Dave Unmacht:

Yep.

Julie Tesch:

And they're the, they're the ones that, um, are depending upon the farm. But yeah, one of, one of our family friends. He's going to have fiber and I'm like, "Oh, I'm going to come work over there." (laughs)

Dave Unmacht:

Yeah.

Julie Tesch:

You know, thinking about the pandemic, and- and we've been talking about things face ... uh, issues, facing small towns, how do we approach cities facing fiscal issues along with the looming uncertainty and

fear of the unknown? Like, how- how do you best advise them right now when you're going to be going out into those, into those towns?

Dave Unmacht:

Well, here's- here's- here's ... It- It's been on our mind for a- a long time. This past summer, we hired a person. She was, uh ... has- has private-sector experience and also has, um, public sector experience. She was the city administrator in Crosby. And she's now, uh, uh ... She specializes in financial advice to our members. Uh, so she gives us ... She's not a ... She doesn't sell bonds or she ... you know, she's not a consultant in that way that- that you can hire to- to get significant advice. But she, she is the point of contact that we have if people have a question about finances or budgets or accounting or anything related to how to operate a city.

And she's just started, and the demand, uh, for her services have been exceptional, primarily because of the- the CARES Act funding and the relief for those communities that are eligible to receive the funding dollars. Uh, and there's a lot, a lot of questions about, you know, what is eligible? What can we use the money for? Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

So, uh, the- the League has stepped up and has a- an individual that is available to assist, um, s- small cities in ... for financial advice. So her name is Lisa Sova, S-O-V-A. Lisa Sova. So if any of your listeners want more information, have them reach out to me or have them just call the League's office and ask for Lisa Sova. She will, um ... She's really, really good. So that's kind of square one. Let's start with that.

You know, the big question for our cities this year, Julie, with respect to your question, is their- their levy, what do they do for their tax levy this year? And what do they do for, uh, the salaries? And what do they do for their budget? Th- they're ... Uh, cities are all over the board. There are some that are moving ahead as if it's kind of a typical year, and there are others that are being very careful and being very deliberate and being prudent or cautious because they're uncertain about, um, the- the future of the ... the future finances.

So, let me give you the- the one that's looming, and this is the one that, uh, your city listeners will understand, and that's a local government aid. So our communities, many communities, rely on a significant portion of their budget or, uh, some portion of their budget on what's called local government aid, which is a distribution from the state. Um, and with the state budget shortfall being as large as this is, uh, I can recall when I was a city and county administrator late in the fiscal calendar year, the- the governor, um, allotted some of our money, and that money, we had planned already. That was in our budget. That was really impactful.

So, cities are worried this year that there could be an allotment. Now that's ... I haven't heard that. I have not been told that, but it's just based on experience. If- if the state has to balance their budget, all things are on the table, and that could be a significant impact on our communities. So we're- we're tracking that and monitoring that very closely. That's a, that's a concern.

The other thing that's very interesting, and I don't think you'll find this as a surprise, but some ... our cities are ... the financial impact of COVID and- and the economic uncertainty and the downturn has been very disparate around the state. For example, some cities are doing fine. It hasn't impacted them significantly. They might not have a police department or, you know, they don't have any of those costs. It didn't impact for them, or did in an inconsequential way. And others are taking big hits.

Just read the paper every day and you'll see cities like Duluth and Bloomington, other cities that rely on, uh, sales tax, uh, to support their activities, or building permit growth, and those kinds of things that are economic-based, um, have- have hurt those cities, uh, more- more proportionally. And- and so what we're

trying to do is understand where those pockets are and- and how, how severe they are and how difficult they are. Um, but there ...

Uh, uh, uh, you know what? I'll I'll say this now, or I'll say it again, our cities are resilient. They figure it out. Our local government officials and our community members are smart. They own challenges they have. And, uh, they may be nervous and anxious, but end of the day, they'll figure it out. They'll figure it out what's right for each community because it's different in each place. It might mean you have to delay a project for a year or two. It might mean you have to cut back on a project.

The league, for example, was ... our building was built in 1994, and we've had a full building remodel plan for this year. We've been working on it for, you know, forever, right? Well, with the pandemic and how it's changed our work, we won't, we're only doing two floors. So we took two floors off, so it basically cut it in half. You know, so cities are going to do that. They may delay the purchase for fire trucks, maybe wait a year or a squad car, or something like that, just to, just to be careful and be prudent.

Julie Tesch:

Sure. And I- I like how you said that, excuse me, cities are resilient. You know, most of these towns have been around for a long time.

Dave Unmacht:

Yeah.

Julie Tesch:

Um, it's just getting, getting through these times. And that leads me into my next question of- of thinking into the future. I know right now we're really concerned about getting through 2020 and into- into '21, uh, with the pandemic. But thinking down the road into the future, what should cities be thinking about in the next five years? What are some priorities you think that they should be looking at?

Dave Unmacht:

You- you- you know what's interesting? You can answer that question and be very thorough by- by- by saying, do what you do best, right? Um, provide the core public services that if you contract with the sheriff for- for law enforcement, you know, continue to partner with the sheriff. You have your own police force, continue to invest in it. Continue to find ways to invest in the infrastructure, jobs and economic development

The one topic that. Julie, we don't have a lot of time for that is ... certainly warrants a significant amount of conversation is housing. Housing in- in Minnesota is a, is a significant challenge. You know, workforce housing, uh, housing for, uh, for the elderly, um, you know, all that. Housing is a big challenge. Focus on w- if you have jobs or where will people live? And that's a really important conversation. Have a conversation about those.

Even though you might not be able to do anything about it tomorrow or next week, or next month, put housing on your agenda and say, "What are our housing needs? Where are people going to live? If we wanted to bring in a small manufacturer with five or 10 people, where are they going to live? Are they gonna have to drive 10, 15 miles every day? Do we have a place for them?"

So you have that core element of what local governments do. Stay true to that and- and stay focused on that. But here are a couple of things I'm going to throw in there that might not be on people's minds that are really, really important. I know you're thinking about them, Julie. And that's one, is to find the next generation of leaders. I think cities should be looking out to find the next generation of leaders.

I think cities should be looking out- out to, uh, find the generation of leaders. You- you and I had a conversation a couple of weeks ago about, uh, kind of a s- a sad trend we see in- in a variety of small cities in rural areas is they- they lack people to run for office, or they can't find people to work ... a staff member, you know, or have a lot of staff anyway.

But if the clerk re- retires or the public works person retires or the one police officer retires, where do you find someone to replace them? Start having conversations with your community about who's next, who's stepping up. Uh, reach out to the schools, reach out to the- the chambers or the businesses. And I know oftentimes elected officials get cycled through, you know, "My dad was the mayor, so it's my turn to be the mayor." You know, "My mom was on the council. So now I'm on the council."

Julie Tesch:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dave Unmacht:

You know, we know there's some of that. And that will always be-

Julie Tesch:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dave Unmacht:

... because there's a finite number of people. Um, but- but- but reach ... talk to your schools, reach out to others in your community. Those that may not have felt like they've been active or involved. Get them involved, get them active in the community, spend some time teaching and learning to them on- on how they, how they do things and, uh, uh, and- and how the city works.

The- the other one I want to share with you and it's- it's- it's- it's not, it's not a surprise, but it's not so obvious. And I- I would encourage our small city officials to, uh, seek to find, uh, as many collaborations or partnerships as they can with other agencies and other groups. You can't do it all. There's no way you're going to do all the things that you need alone. And there are people willing to help, whether it's- it's the Initiative Foundation, an economic development coalition, whether it's the county, the- the- the- the USDA or- or anybody.

I mean, if- i- if you're, if you're, if you're passionate enough and you've got a lot of energy, you can find someone who's willing to help you. It may take a while and you may have to be pretty persistent. I'm thinking about that movie Shawshank Redemption, when, um, the- the prisoner wrote hundreds of letters to the, to the state ... someone at the state to get his library built, and eventually had this outstanding library if you remember that movie.

Julie Tesch:

Yes. Yes. Great movie.

Dave Unmacht:

Well, use the same analogy. Keep writing letters and keep making phone calls and keep being persistent. Um, and, uh, and- and work for ... find partnerships. Here's- here's one thing that's- that's interesting is in- in small communities, it's not ... people know everybody, right? You know who people are, and you've-

Julie Tesch:

Correct.

Dave Unmacht:

... um, grew up with them. And sometimes there's relationships that aren't very strong or they're strained for whatever reason. We're human beings, you know. In order to- to figure out the future of your community, you may have to put those relationships that's- that's ... that- that ... behind you and try to figure out how to work with people that may-

Julie Tesch:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dave Unmacht:

... not agree with you, or don't necessarily have the same opinion about the future of the community. Reach and find consensus because it's better to do something than nothing. And- and, uh, so, you know, I'm not talking about even political, I'm talking about just people. Um, so ...

Julie Tesch:

Absolutely.

Dave Unmacht:

Yeah. Those are some of the things that I- I [crosstalk].

Julie Tesch:

I'm glad you, I'm glad you mentioned that. I'm glad you mentioned that about not going it alone because, you know, uh, people are, uh, independent. And I think in rural areas, we're especially independent. We're- we're used to having to do that more often, to do things ourselves. And encouraging these cities to reach out and- and have those partnerships. It's okay to ask for help. You know, that-that's the only way that we're getting the water project done in Waldorf is, uh, they asked for help. It took a long, long time, you know. But you have to do what's good for the greater good.

Dave Unmacht:

Well, sometimes you- you think that no one, s ...

Julie Tesch:

So, um-

Dave Unmacht:

You- you- you- you haven't heard anybody or you don't think anybody's there to help, so you kind of give up. You kind of just say, "Well, it isn't worth it. It's not going to happen," and kind of move on. And in some cases, the answer may be no. But- but work to find a maybe or a yes, and keep- keep pushing on. And eventually, uh, you know, you're going to have what you're looking for.

Julie Tesch:

Absolutely. And that leads perfectly into the next question, which is, are cities any better off in 2020 than they were in 2015? I know that can be a- a jaded question, but- but given your position and what you've seen in the last five years, what are your thoughts?

Dave Unmacht:

Yeah, I know what you mean in terms of the context of the question, especially on ... in mid-September day, and we have something moving here in a, in a month-and-a-half. But I'll- I'll be fair, and I won't answer it in that context at all. I'll do it in a, in a, in a respectful way, uh, 'cause people have differences of opinion upon, on what should happen on election day. And- and I respect that.

Is I- I go back. I started in the, in ... This is going to date me, but I started in 1983, and as a city administrator in Belle Plaine. Belle Plaine, although in Scott County, was certainly rural in a small community then, it's- it's- it's still a lot of ag-based support in Belle Plaine, even though it's bigger now and clearly part of the metropolitan area in a geographic way.

And when I started, I can recall the- the challenges of being a city administrator wa- was, uh, community involvement, lack of money, uh, more projects than we were able to fund, um, and, uh, a variety of different situations. And if I fast forward now, you know, 35, 36 years, some of those same experiences, we- we live in today. And so I- I- I grew up in that world and I know that world will always be that way.

So to- to help answer your question about that five-year period, you have to really go back 35 years, and fast forward five years. We'll never going to have enough money. You know, we're- we're always going to be struggling to prioritize what's important to do. We're always going to be, uh, looking to, uh, looking to, you know, to ask people for help.

Um, and, and so in 20- ... what, 2010, 2015? you know, we had that same overlay, if you will. But what's exasperated the condition of our small cities and our rural areas today are ... is the, is the pandemic. Let's just, let's just put it on the table. And, um, right, wrong, or otherwise, we've never faced that before.

I've faced several recessions in my career. Some that we thought were big, turned out not to be when we had the one in 2007, '08, '09, '10 timeframe. That was significant. That's something we never faced before, but we came out of that strong. The economy came out of that strong. And we had a strong economy prior to this one, but this is a game changer, you know?

So we're in a period of uncertainty. And- and you can't answer the question in a definitive, "Yes, they're better," or, "No, they're not better." And- and- and- and- and to be, to be fair, you have to answer it more on a continuum of where were you? Where did you want to go and what prevented you from getting there? How do you get back to where you wanted to be, uh, when, you know, when there's a, when there's a vaccine or whatev- or whatever, right? I mean, I can't predict that.

Julie Tesch:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dave Unmacht:

But, uh, establish your place, maintain where you're at. Don't go backward, um, slow things down if you have to. But be positioned to invest in your community and be ready to go when things, uh, become different. I- I ... People are using the term "new normal" or "normal". And I- I've heard that in my entire career, so I'm not sure that's ... I don't even like that phrase, frankly, because everything's different.

Julie Tesch:

Agreed.

Dave Unmacht:

It always is. Uh, we change all time. So we will, we will have a different set of ... a different way of life and a different way we're working and doing things in the future when we can look back past the pandemic, but we're not there now. Um, so cities ...

Julie Tesch:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dave Unmacht:

... I think what's biggest, if I may, after a five-minute answer, the biggest difference between then and now is uncertainty. You know, in 20- in 2010, 2015, we didn't, we were out of the great recession and we were growing and doing things. So that level of anxiousness and uncertainty wasn't there. Today, they have that. And you put it on top of all the other challenges that our small cities and rural areas have, I think it makes it harder to be a community leader and a civic leader ...

Julie Tesch:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dave Unmacht:

... and an, and an elected official because your challenges are- are that much more difficult. Um, but they're also more rewarding. They're also ... There's more opportunities out there. There's also more ... uh, maybe greater risk, but greater reward. And, uh ... So don't view it all as a negative, view it as an opportunity for growth and development. Change the mindset. And, um, you never know ...

Julie Tesch:

Yup.

Dave Unmacht:

... how far you can go.

Julie Tesch:

Yeah. Changing that narrative. And- and so, we've looked past five years, 35 years. Going into the future and changing that mindset and changing that narrative, what do cities need to deliberately do, maybe in their mindset, uh, whether it's housing, whatever, what do they need to deliberately do in the next five years to see some dramatic change for the positive?

Dave Unmacht:

You know, there- there ... Here's what's interesting about that question is the word "dramatic" because if- if that changed the whole-

Julie Tesch:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dave Unmacht:

... context of the question, if you'd say, what should cities do in the next five years? I could rattle off of, you know, 10 things and people would go, "Oh boy, he knows what he's talking about." Right? I mean, some of it's what we've talked about. Some of it might not be.

Julie Tesch:

(laughs)

Dave Unmacht:

And- and I do just because I've been around a long time, but I'm focused on that word dramatic. And that's a, that's a game changer of a question. And so, as I was thinking about that question ...

Julie Tesch:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dave Unmacht:

... I- I- I- uh ... I've already alluded to, you know, some things that cities should do. So I'm going to answer it in a different way. And I'm going to use a foundation of what I said in the question before is I think in- in order to be dramatic, right, let's just ... I think they have to come together as a community, universally. You ... If your community is split, um, you- you're gonna, you're gonna forever be split and not get things done.

Um, i- ... That doesn't mean five-0 votes or everybody holds hands and sings, right? It- it just talks about coming together to determine a plan for where you want to go. And I don't want to use the word strategic plan because that sounds a little bit heavy. And it sounds a little bit, uh, uh, too much. But i- i- i- i- if you get together as a city council, in the next four months and you sit down, and all you talk about is, uh, is- is, "Should we spend that \$100 for a new, um, you know, an, uh, uh, a- a new auger, you know, that ... just decide on the auger in one second, spend the next hour talking about what's the future of your community?"

Where do we want this community to go in the next five years? And start identifying ideals and- and visions, and things that you think would be really cool, but be honest about it. You're not going to go from 50 people to 500 people in six months, or 100 people to 1000 people. But spend time thinking about the future of your community. That's the challenge. That's scary, but it's worth it.

The next one is, uh, I think create an identity. What makes you different than another community down the road that has 50 people, or 100 people, or 1000 people, or 5,000? Um, uh, every- every community has, uh ... most communities have ... has a mission or a slogan or something, right? What- what makes Waldorf attractive? If I was looking for a rural place to live, near the Mankato area 'cause I wanted to work in that area, why would I pick your city?

You, as a city leader, should be able to answer that question without hesitation. Why your city? Why don't I go over to this other city? Pick a city, name another city. Create an identity. Um, so that's the second one, come together as one. The third one, may be a little tried and true, but I think this is really key. Figure out the- the amount of money it takes to make some fixes to your community, whether it's infrastructure or a fire station or whatever it is. Th- those capital costs that your community can't do alone, and really work the Legislature hard.

Um, people are reluctant to do that or they does- don't think it's gonna, uh, get anywhere, or they're not going to get enough. So they kind of say, "Well, we don't have the time or the effort." I really think that if they'd come to the le- their legislative delegation and say, "We've got a plan, we know where we want to go. We have an identity. We have a strategy and, oh, by the way, we need \$1 million or \$2 million," or whatever the amount might be, "Please help," or go to all those funding sources and say, "Please help." You'd be surprised. You'd be surprised.

You know, if you, if you would do none of the ... of the preparation and call your legislative delegation or others and say, "Hey, we just need money 'cause this is broke," the answer might be a- a scratch in the head, but if you've come together and say, "Here's a four-phase plan for the future of our city, and here's what we need from you, and here's what we're going to invest in ourselves," you'd be surprised at the response you'd get. So that's what I think people should do for dramatic change. It's um, it's- it's hard work. It's sweat equity. It's um, it's- it's-

Julie Tesch:

It is.

Dave Unmacht:

... it's a lot of anxiousness, but I, uh, I think it can work.

Julie Tesch:

Yeah. It's not quick work.

Dave Unmacht:

No.

Julie Tesch:

You know, it- it- it might take, uh, five, 10, 15, 20 years, but it's work that needs to be done. And you, and you talk about getting in touch with legislators and showing them your plan, you know, that goes to relationship building, and letting people know that you're I- letting your legislative delegation know that you are here and inviting them to town events, you're inviting them to the school, getting them involved.

Um, I think we forget that- that we just assume that our elected leaders just will show up, where it's like, "No, let's invite them. Let's- let's help them realize what we have here." So I- I think those are really good- good answers to that dramatic question. And I have one more question. You know, we're trying to find more leaders in rural Minnesota. We're trying to get more people active. What advice do you have for rural residents who are looking to get involved in local government?

Dave Unmacht:

It'll be the best thing you ever do in your life, is a, is a direct and honest answer. You'll- you'll- you'll lose, you'll lose sleep at night worrying about stuff. You'll be so proud and happy and- and feel good when you make decisions that, uh, are- are- are uh good for your community. And, um, all of the above and everything in between, uh, uh. Some other suggestions: Local government is where you can make the most difference.

You can make a difference tomorrow if you're a city staff member or an elected official. You- you're boots on the ground. That's why I got into this business back in ... when I was in college. I was ... I wanted to do local government. I was involved in senate, you know, the school senate and all that kind of stuff. And I thought, "Well, I want to continue my local government career. Where can I make the biggest difference?"

And it wasn't at the federal level or at the state level or regional. It was local government. And that's proven true. And that's, that's still true to this day. It's why people get into this business. You can, you can see the things that you do really quick for the future of your community. That could be simply as fixing a ballpark, right, or doing something really easy or putting a fence up ...

Julie Tesch:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dave Unmacht:

... or whatever. You can go, "I did that. I was part of that. I feel really good about that." People can see it. It's tangible. Second, you know deep in your heart, it takes everybody to be involved especially when you have a finite number of people that you can tap, that you ... You can't avoid it. You can't avoid the, whether you want to be a volunteer or whether you want to be elected, or something. Pitch in and help out.

Uh, it- it takes, you know ... You've heard the saying, "It takes a village ..." Well, it takes everybody. Whether you want to define it as a village or not, it doesn't matter. It takes everybody to get involved. And I think the next one that if you're not a city official and you're listening to this podcast, educate yourself on what the issues are.

You know, may ... you may know your city council and you may, you may, uh, you may think that, "Well, they're making this decision because of this or because of that," but spend some time learning about what the issues are and what the challenges are and how hard it is to do that. You'll be amazed at how much you learn. You'd be amazed at what you get to know about what really happens, whether that's the budget or your capital improvement plan, or a zoning ordinance or whatever it is that's- that is going on in your particular community. Um, learn and understand what the issues are and you'll be surprised and maybe you'll pique your interest. And um the last one I have is tied to it takes everyone to get involved, is a volunteer. Volunteer for something.

Julie Tesch:

Hmm. Yep.

Dave Unmacht:

And I know we have a- a wonderful spirit in our, in our rural areas. We have, uh, as I said, a few moments ago, and you agreed, this resilient nature of, "We got this." The League adopted a hashtag "We got this" mantra when it came to COVID. Well, our small communities in rural Minnesota should say, "We got this. You know, We can do this. We can figure it out. We've- we've come this, we've come this far. Let's, uh, take it upon ourselves to- to take it to the next level in the future." I think those are some of the things ... um, you know, it's a great career. It's a great interest. Learn, understand, volunteer pitch in, help out. Uh, you'd be surprised at, uh, how much you learn, how much you know, and how much fun it would be.

Julie Tesch:

I like that. I really liked that. We got this. That is, uh, that's fantastic. That's a fantastic mantra. And I think that's what- what people need to be focusing on. Follow up question to that. If there are, uh, young people out there wanting to get into the career of local government, what did you study in college?

Dave Unmacht:

So it's- it's- it's- it's a really super question. Um, it's ... I studied public administration. So I was a business political science major. And I got my master's degree in public administration. I'm an Iowa kid came up from Des Moines, I was born in Dubuque. So I know ... You know Iowa's rural state, uh, just like, uh, just like Minnesota with, uh ... Minnesota is a bigger population, but there are a lot of a com- comparabilities. But here's what's interesting. Not everybody can do that, but local government provides such a unique fi- set of fields.

Let me just run real quick. You know, public works. Public works, you know, build things, drive things, plow, trucks, uh, uh, drive graders, fix roads. I mean, construction trades is a, is an area that is in local government. Uh, public safety, whether you're an EMT or law enforcement ... I know law enforcement's a challenging profession now, there's a lot of questions about it, but we're going to need more and more law enforcement officers, and EMTs, and sheriff's deputies going forward forever. And not as many people are going into that field. So, it's really a wide open field and it's a, it's a really good career. So, I'd encourage people to explore that.

Uh, information technology people, finance people, engineers. And, uh, you can ... if you have a- a technical or a science-based interest, there are jobs that are in water resources. There are jobs in engineering, uh, there are jobs in technology, whether you like the- the software or the hardware part of it. There's just all kinds of different fields. So if you're interested in local government, spend some time looking at what job postings are out there on the various websites, and you'll get a feel for the type of vacancies that, uh, exist and the type of jobs that you can search for. So there's a lot of cool jobs, um, and- and even if you don't go through the kind of the administrative route that I did.

Julie Tesch:

That's great. That is, is that is great. Is there a specific moment growing up where you decided I want to go into public administration? Is there a- a moment that stands out for you?

Dave Unmacht:

Yeah, I think. You know, it's a ... I hadn't thought of that in a while now. You know, there isn't ... I can't look at one thing, but here's what I do remember about a city manager.

Julie Tesch:

Sure.

Dave Unmacht:

So, um, I got rejected from my senator. I wanted to go out to Washington like every 20-year-old and work for the senator for a summer in the office. Right?

Julie Tesch:

(laughs) Yeah.

Dave Unmacht:

And take phone calls and- and greet constituents. Well, I wasn't active in any party and I wasn't involved in politics or anything like that when I was young. But I did write my senator and I found that rejection letter the other day when I was kind of going through old things. And, uh, shortly thereafter ... Here's why that's connected, shortly thereafter, I was on the student, uh, council. So our high school had a youth in government day, and I was a councilmember. I got elected by my classmates via councilmembers.

So we had a mock council meeting at Dubuque City hall. Uh, and we had ... we have two high schools, two public high schools, so we mixed it up together. And there was other kids I didn't know, and there was a mayor. And we got to meet the city manager. The city manager walked in, and he was a silver-haired, good looking gentlemen with this cool suit on. And I looked at him and- and I go, "I- I'd like to do that." His name was Gil Chavanelle. Long gone, right. And I go, "I'd like to do that. You know, uh, I want to be him." You know.

Julie Tesch:

That's awesome.

Dave Unmacht:

Then I went off to college and graduate school, and, uh, I eventually got to be him. Now, here's what's interesting. There's a, there's a, there's a road in my hometown near my house called Gil Chavanelle Road. They actually named it after him 'cause he was kind of a legendary guy. I wrote a column a while back and I said, "You know, one thing is not likely to happen is a road being named after me." But here's why I enjoy this career. And I had some fun with that.

Julie Tesch:

That's fantastic.

Dave Unmacht:

Yeah.

Julie Tesch:

I always enjoy learning about why people go in- into their careers or how they fell into it. That- that one, many instances, but that one specifically. That's- that's just fantastic.

Dave Unmacht:

Yeah.

Julie Tesch:

That is fantastic. Well, thank you so much, Dave. We greatly appreciate having you on the Center of Everywhere podcast. I know. I- ... Gosh, I c- I could talk to you all day and ask you all sorts of questions. And so, hopefully, you'll be able to come back on the podcast and um, maybe after- after things settle down into 2021. But, uh, again, we got this, I think that- that's a great mantra for our cities. And I thank you again for being on the Center of Everywhere podcast.

Dave Unmacht:

Well, Julie, t- two things. One, thank you for, uh, allowing me to be on the podcast. Thank you for reaching out to the League of Minnesota Cities. Uh, secondly, thank you for what you do. Um, Rural Minnesota Research is an important agency. And you- you do good work, and um, you invest in the future of our small cities in rural Minnesota, and that's so important. And, um, I know sometimes it can be a thankless job, like many jobs are, but keep the faith, keep up the good work, and all the best to you and your colleagues. And I'd be happy to come on anytime down the line. And, uh, thanks again.

[Podcast theme music begins]

Podcast Announcer:

You've been listening to the Center of Everywhere podcast, where we explore stories of rural Minnesotans who are making a difference in their communities. Rural isn't in the middle of nowhere. It is in the center of everywhere.

[Podcast theme music ends]