

Transcript: Interview with Mayor Michael J. Peterson

Interviewer: *This oral history interview is being recorded in the City Council Chambers of the Cottonwood Heights City Hall in Cottonwood Heights, Utah on November 16, 2021.*

Conducting the interview for the Cottonwood Heights Historic Committee is committee member, Ken Verdoia.

Michael J. Peterson, Mayor City of Cottonwood Heights.

Ken Verdoia: Mayor, thanks so much.

Mayor Peterson: You're Welcome.

Ken: Mayor, your connection with this community predates it being a city and actually goes back in your own life, to your early childhood memories. Tell me about your family connection with this community, where you went to school, and how you grew up, just some recollections in that area.

Mayor Mike Peterson: Excited to do it. That is why I love the community so much and why my roots are so deep. My family moved here in 1954. I was in kindergarten or first grade, lived on Virginia Hills Drive, which is at the top of what was then called Butler Hill, the first street just east of the old chapel there. Then I went to the old Butler Elementary School and spent many years here at that time, then moved and came back, years later. My whole life, raising my family and everything is right here in Cottonwood Heights.

Ken: So, you're a first-hand observer of the way this community has evolved from those post-war boom years, when the first housing was being put in, but it still very much had an open fields sense, in a lot of respects, for the community, that was known variously as Cottonwood Heights or Butlerville.

Mike: Yeah, absolutely! Because, again, what I loved at that time, as a young child, was that I could walk out my door, go to my back yard, and it was a straight shot to the Wasatch Mountains. There was a gravel pit to the north of us, but I could walk straight up to the Wasatch Mountain—that was my playground! It was fantastic in almost every direction! Or I could go to the West and there was the Lazy Bar Ranch, and we could go horseback riding, or I could go hunt lizards in the sand dunes where Brighton High School now is, and stuff like that. There was not a lot here at that time, but it was an amazing place to grow up as a young boy!

Ken: Tell me about your schooling. You indicated Butler Elementary School, but the school configuration has changed dramatically by the 21st Century when we are meeting. Where did you go to school beyond Butler Elementary?

Mike: Well, on the south end of Butler Elementary School grounds, was an old school bus building, which served as the backstop for us playing baseball, softball, kick soccer, and all those things on the playground. Then, after elementary school, my parents moved a little bit to the north and I went to Wasatch Junior High School and Skyline High School, then graduated from the University of Utah. Once I got married and started to have a family, we decided this is where we wanted to be—The City Between the Two Canyons, because growing up here, I wanted my kids (I have five children) to have the same experiences I had, which is living in what I think is one of the premier places in the Valley.

Ken: Tell me about the professional decisions you made, when you went through your undergraduate degree, because I know you had a strong commitment to Community Service and Community Engagement, coming out of college.

Mike: Yeah, my degree is in Urban Recreation and Parks Administration. I focused on the administrative side, but my early career was dealing with youth, namely, youth at risk, in the northwestern part of Salt Lake City, as a recreation leader. That is where I learned how important public service is in giving something back to young people and others, who maybe have less, or who would like to have more. Eventually, I was Deputy Director of SL County Aging Services. I ended up working with all age groups. So, for all of fifty years, my life has been spent giving service, public service, and it's been a great experience—I wouldn't change a thing.

Ken: You were directly connected with the Cottonwood Heights Recreation Center, were you not? Tell me about that.

Mike: I was. Well, in 1971 I started as a Rec Leader working directly with at-risk kids and eventually moved on to be the Associate Director for County Parks and Recreation. After just under 30 years, I was asked by the community to be one of the elected Board of Trustees for the Cottonwood Heights Parks & Recreation Services Area. So, I ran a simple campaign and was elected to serve two terms. Then, at the beginning of my second term (I had 30 years of service in with Salt Lake County), because the then director [Ed. Note: Director of the Cottonwood Heights Service District, including the Recreation Center on 2700 East] Richard

Guthrie was retiring, they asked me “Mike, would you consider taking over the service area, because that has been your background and experience, plus you are a local resident, and besides it pays great dividends.” So, at that time, year 2000, I became the Director of Special Tax District, which is the Rec Center, and spent another 15 years there. Thus, my 30 years with Salt Lake County. That has been my love, my passion, and to do it right in my own community was a dream come true, it was perfect.

Ken: You were part of a rather extensive renovation of the Recreation Center, leading towards the 2002 Olympics, but more than just the Olympics, it was really kind of a re-envisioning of the Rec Center.

Mike: Well, the Rec Center, or the Special District, was created in the late ‘60’s, because Salt Lake County did not have sufficient funds to provide the Parks & Recreation amenities that the Community really wanted. The Community went to the County and they said “We can’t do it, but we can give you a little bit of land. So they created then, with three Trustees, a Special District and started providing services. Initially, it was just an indoor pool and a couple of parks. Then, when I came on, we added to the Rec Center, we added the Outdoor Pool, we added the Skate Park, we added the Ice Rink, we developed more parks, we collaborated more with Salt Lake County, with the School District, because it really is that partnering/collaboration that provided so many more amenities for our community that we see today.

Ken: We now are sitting in the City Council Chambers building, in the City of Cottonwood Heights. However, it wasn’t so long ago that there was NOT a City of Cottonwood Heights. You were a significant figure, one of many community figures, that bridged that gap from an unincorporated existence for this community to incorporation. Can you take me back, and try to reconstruct, what were the driving forces behind creating this City in this Space?

Mike: I was lucky enough, as the Director of Special District, to also be asked, and elected, to what then was a Cottonwood Heights Community Council. That Community Council would look at different relationships with the County. I think, Holladay had just incorporated, and there was a young man who had worked with the then Mayor Stillman at that time, and she [Ed. Note: Mayor Liane Stillman] said “Cottonwood Heights, you should consider this.” We said, “Well, lets look at this further. So, one of the first things we did is we got back to the County, and I chaired, personally, the Feasibility Study Committee to look at: “Does it work for

us?” Our original plans were to look at a city slightly bigger than we have right now, but then they had the “110% Rule” which said you couldn’t have more revenues than it took to operate the City. The City said we had to cut out a bit of the property on the south end.

Anyway, we went through a whole process. We evaluated what would be better for us, local control dealing with everything from planning to green space, to trails, to everything you can ever think of that the city is able to manage, including public safety and all those things. We decided to “Ask the public what they wanted.” We put information together, put it out to the public, and they almost unanimously voted to create the City. So, I was involved in those early stages.

And then, I even participated in providing recommendations of the initial services that we should offer within the City; such as, who should do our Justice of the Peace Courts, how should we handle fire, how should we handle police? So, we were able, at that time, to give the then new City Administration, some ideas of how they could get their “feet on the ground” and start creating their own ideas. We were lucky to have Mayor Kelvyn Cullimore, who was dynamic, and a great mayor for that time, to make things happen and organize things the way he did.

Ken: Let me back up, just a little bit to the move to incorporation. Sometimes, it is born from *dissatisfaction*. Sometimes it is born of unique opportunity. How would you characterize Cottonwood Heights?

Mike: I would characterize Cottonwood Heights as “a little bit of both.” I don’t think there was a lot of dissatisfaction. I think there was a desire to kind of create our own destiny a little bit more than before, because we were a small community in a large pool (Salt Lake County). This way, we could create our own direction. I think there was more of that, then anything. I think there were some people who, obviously, were opposed to incorporation, because they loved the County, because the County was basically good to us, but I think being able to make our own decisions was better in the eyes of the community at that time.

Ken: Your decision, to stand for election for City Council, now that seems like a natural outgrowth of the Community Council and the experience we shared. The Community Council was one thing, but to stand for election was different. You

had already stood for Special Services District. Tell me about that decision you made, obviously, with your family, saying, "I'm going to take this step forward."

Mike: Never my plans! Never in my wildest dreams! I loved public service, to me it's a service about the people. You don't do it for money, you don't do it for recognition, it's about the community and the people you care about. For me it's about providing amenities and services that create a better quality of life for the people that is "second to none."

So, being involved in the Community Council, and after 40 years of public service, there was a council member who was elected, then had to resign because of employment. They were asking people to submit letters of interest to fill an unexpired term. I was asked to submit a letter by several people who knew me, and I hesitated, but then said "You know what? At this stage in my life, I want to stay involved, I want to stay close to what's happening," so I submitted a resume, along with about 10 other individuals. I went through an interview process and was selected. So, my first term on the City Council was filling an unexpired term. Then, when I did that, one of the questions in the interview was, "Well, after this two plus years, that was my term is over, are you willing to run again?" I hesitated a little bit, but then said "Sure." So, I ran again, against some strong, wonderful people, and won election at that time for a second term on the City Council.

Ken: When you run for office in a community like Cottonwood Heights, these are not like Senate races, or races for Governor, there's very much a neighborhood-feel, there's a face-to-face, you know the people that you're running against and a lot of times you may be in the same worship settings, or recreational settings, so does that make it a better experience or a more challenging experience when you're so intimately connected with the neighborhoods?

Mike: For me it was a great experience and a better experience, because I took it upon myself to make sure that I got out there and met the people. Once again, I had a huge advantage, being the Director of the Rec Center, and being close to retirement at that time, I was known and, what's interesting, when I ran that first official campaign, I knocked on (I think) every single door, (including yours, Ken) in my District at some point. Again, some people were not there, but it was really interesting, I'd knock on a door and introduce myself. Many would say "Okay, you're running for City Council." I'd say, "But my real job is I'm Director of Recreation." The response, "Oh, you are? Oh, well Wow!" People would want to talk about services. It broke the ice and created a relationship immediately

because people are so concerned about the quality of life. But I think, being a resident, being involved, especially on a council district or smaller area, provided truly, in our form of government, a great opportunity to serve where the citizens really can contact you personally. I have a goal that I promise to return every call within 24 hours. I've not missed that goal yet. Okay?. And, I've encouraged people to get to know who we are. If I'm playing Pickleball, or if I'm going for a run, or if my wife's playing tennis, or whatever it is, people can come up and say "Hey, Mayor or Hey Mike, what's going on? That's what is wonderful. And again, in a bigger city or bigger areas, I'm not sure you have that sensitivity or relationship.

Ken: Going back, I think you said, you were not initially on the Council when it were first empaneled, but you were soon on the scene. What are the greatest challenges to a young City?

Mike: Just getting organized. I mean, it's like starting up any business, because I think cities are much more complex than the residents realize. Things like public safety, planning, creating a planning commission, and where are you going to be housed? In our form of government, the mayor and city council are part time. You've got to hire full time staff, a city manager, a planning director. You've got to decide, are you going to do public works or are you going to contract it out? We chose contract initially, until we got up and running. So, it's just becoming organized and determining what level of services that you want to give to the community, and then make sure that you're transparent enough, for the community to feel that they have input on what you are creating and proposing. So, that was the biggest challenge—getting organized, and then it's kind of "value added" from that first year, then every year adding value and adjusting and clarifying as you move forward each year. Let's see, it's been 16 years now.

Ken: As you well know, everybody has an opinion on law enforcement. Cottonwood Heights early on, made a decision that it wanted to have its own law enforcement, rather than contracting out to Unified Police etc. Tell me how you feel about that, if you think it is a good investment, and how that serves the community.

Mike: Love to. I mentioned I spent 30 years with Salt Lake County. Twenty-six of those 30 years were in Parks & Recreation which was really my passion. At the end of my career, after I had about 26 years, I was asked if I would be the Director of Salt Lake County Criminal Justice Services. So luckily, I have some experience in

dealing with the Criminal Justice Arena. A little bit, and one thing I learned as I dealt with programs and activities in the Criminal Justice Arena, was that “One shoe doesn’t fit all.” Every community is different. So, I support having direct control in localized public safety...fire and police, so that we can customize to meet the needs of our community. Because our community’s needs are much different than if I’m working with somebody in West Valley City, or Glendale or Salt Lake City. It’s much different. We want to be able to adjust and adapt to that. Not given a blank check, still holding some level of accountability which is customized to meet the needs of our community. Because, when I was knocking on all those doors as a City Council Member, one of the common themes was, “We want to have a quality public safety department, so that when we have an issue and call Fire or Police, they respond and respond timely, so we’re able to ensure that we have that kind of response.” It doesn’t mean we don’t have challenges, it doesn’t mean we’re not always improving, because every organization, hopefully, is always improving. To be able to customize to meet our needs, that is why we became a city.

Ken: As a Council Member, you were a direct witness, and you probably heard this so many times over the years, that a fundamental challenge a community faces is between preserving a sense of community yet developing to meet current and future needs. How do we “hold on to what we have,” yet how do we “rise to meet a challenge?” This has got to be one of the things that is most vexing for any elected city leader.

Mike: I think that is one of the biggest challenges. Because, as someone who has basically spent all of my life in Cottonwood Heights, other than a few years here and there, I really like to preserve the “feel” that I grew up with in elementary school, that my children grew up with. The reality is, we have to grow, we have to change. The challenge is to do it in the right way. Which means we don’t want to destroy local communities, but at the same time we have to allow some level of affordable housing, some level of some development to go in based on some level of statutes. It’s really a balancing act, to be sensitive to both sides, to the development, improvements and growth in our city, but at the same time, not allow “the tail to wag the dog.”

Ken: How do you respond to someone who says: “Mike, I loved this place when I moved here in 1980! Why can’t we stay in 1980? Why can’t we just hold on to what we were? This is different than when people say “Not in my back yard!” But when people say, Jeez, I loved it when...

Mike: Well, the first thing is, that it validates a position. I agree, I wish we could leave it all kind of “as it was, so to speak.” Reality is, that every community is changing, adapting to new demands. That’s why I do all I can to preserve Open Space, where ever there is an opportunity. At the same time, individuals have certain rights when they buy a property. Those rights allow them to do certain things on that property. So, its planning, with citizen input, allowing property owners to do certain things with their property they have the right to do. At the same time, not allow so much development that we destroy “the feel” that we have. So, it is a balancing act. It’s like these two big canyons we have. There are millions of people that want to get to those canyons. They want to drive through our city. Well, how do we facilitate that? We don’t own every road in our city—we own most of them, but UDOT owns some of the major roads. There are outside influences where we must negotiate with those other entities—if it’s the County, if it’s the School District, if it’s the State, all those entities--to make sure that we balance things appropriately. So, this is not a great answer, but it is one where I support, trying to keep the feel we’ve had for decades, and at the same time recognize there’s going to be development, there’s going to be growth, but we must manage that growth properly.

Ken: You mentioned earlier the “citizen mayor, the citizen council member,” that they are part-time positions. Do we say that “tongue in cheek?” Tell me, the real commitment of being a City Councilman or being a mayor.

Mike: What I talked about earlier, is a form of government that allows the mayor to be close to the people, that allows the Councilman to be close to the people—at least they should be. That form of government is what we call “A weak mayor form.” You have a City Manager who is a professional in City Management. Then you have a mayor who leads the Council, works with the City Manager to manage all of the different issues that come before the City, and sets the agenda and process of the day-to-day operations. These are the duties of the City Manager with a complete staff. The process is much more complex than people really understand. Therefore, when you are elected Mayor, it is called part-time. You are absolutely right, that is a fallacy. We must define part-time again—one day it can be 10 hours, the next day it can be 2 hours—you do whatever it takes to make sure that the goals of the city are being met. So, it changes. Citizens don’t want to wait until the next week to be responded to. And they sometimes will call a City Administrator and if they don’t get a response, they have other resources to call--the Mayor or City Council. I have an opportunity to bring the city

administration, and the residents together, so we can process it. Now, being a resident, I can, hopefully be more sensitive than the professionals can be, because I live here, I understand it. So, I think that works really well, bringing those different entities together, if it's a constituent, if it's administration, if it's an elected official, then do what you can to facilitate the ongoing operation.

Ken: Your term as mayor will be remembered as the "Era of the Pandemic." As we meet in the month of November 2021, more than 20 months of city services, and government services, have been powerfully impacted by battling this disease that has swept through our society. From your perspective, how has it affected this community?

Mike: Another great question. I think it was 2017, when Mayor Cullimore decided that he would not run for another term, and I was approached to run for mayor and to the people closest to me I said "No Way!" So, they approached me again and I said "No" and my wife said, "I'll divorce you if you run!" Obviously that was a little bit "tongue in cheek" and people came another time and talked to my wife and me and said "You know, you've really got to do it—you've got the experience, the background, the deep roots in the community, and I love this community, I love what we do, I love what we offer and what we stand for, so, the point is, at that time in 2017, I agreed I would run, and said "If I run, I'm going to give 110%.

Okay, that is what I chose to do and I ran and I had NO IDEA what in the next four years, we, as a City, would have to deal with. One of those major things we could get hit with was Covid and we would have to shut down many of our city programs, activities, and operations--the way we do business. Everything we do, how we hold Council Meetings, how we meet with constituents, how I, as the mayor, would operate, because the mayor sits on numerous boards throughout the city, boards that facilitate the city. How do you attend those meetings, how do you communicate, how do you carry out activities like Butlerville Days, or Arts Council activities, etc. etc. It would all get put on HOLD. Covid was a challenging, challenging aspect of my term of office. But again, I think with the help from the community, with a quality staff (right now we have a great city manager) by working a lot of extra hours, with a lot of strategy sessions, to determine how we would not negatively affect services, yet still deal with Covid, I think we did that, and we're still in it today. We are still, often, talking with the school district, because we have all these other "sister agencies" we have to coordinate with as

well (i.e. the school district), the county, the public health department, all these people who have some say as to the quality of these experiences in our city.

Ken: What would you say is the most noteworthy accomplishment of the City of Cottonwood Heights over these past four years? What do you point to and say “I’m very proud, I’m glad we do this, I’m glad we accomplished this?” What would you say?

Mike: I wouldn’t say it is one thing. I think that is the great thing about a small city like this—the multiplicity of things. And that is, the overall sensitivity of our constituents in maintaining a quality of life, that starts with roads (we have a five-year road plan), that starts with efficiency in the use of public tax dollars, while making sure that those dollars are used appropriately, and we try not to raise taxes every year. We have raised taxes once in the 16 years of our city. When I leave office, our fund balance will probably be greater than it has been in several years. We also make sure that we are sensitive to our small businesses, which is a priority of mine as well, as it makes the quality of life even better. If you want a little restaurant, you want to go to a grocery store, you can access it easily and it is good quality, and they feel glad to be in our city.

Another thing I am proud of is that we have taken over a couple of parks for the county. The county didn’t want to handle them anymore. We made sure we understood and could meet the challenge, of making sure they are maintained under open public use. We purchased 26 acres of open space along Wasatch Boulevard, to keep it open and not developed, as was being talked about earlier. We have another piece of property, that I will talk about right now. It is another piece of green space that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints is talking about eliminating. Well, I have worked hard to make sure we do not lose that. The majority of it will be maintained by the City, so that Green Space (that Open Space), is not lost.

You know, also, I think I am proud of our Public Safety presence. Again, as was my understanding when I ran for mayor, that our citizens would like to have strong, public safety fire and police. We have these, our response times are excellent, we have an outstanding public safety department as far as police. Obviously, they have gone through some challenges, as they have throughout the nation, but we have a level of accountability, we have thought through those challenges, and again, our response times are outstanding. So people who live in Cottonwood Heights can feel safe, and if they make a call for an emergency (if its

medical, or police-related), they'll get a response time that is very timely. So, again, a multiplicity of successes, and as I said earlier in the interview, it's about "value added." Taking what was here in our city when I became Mayor, and just continue to build on it, continue to adjust and adapt, to the changing demands, from wherever they are coming from—if it's from Covid, from challenges in public safety, from planning, but again, most importantly stay close to the people who elected you, the public, as to what they would like to see.

Ken: During your term, and you have alluded to it a bit, there was a high-profile incident in August 2020, when citizens gathered in demonstrations. There was some anger. I won't even attempt to characterize it in this oral interview. But it was a "charged incident." As the Mayor, as you looked at this, as you tried to sort out the anger, the frustration, whatever may have been present in that incident in August 2020, what was your takeaway from that?

Mike: Well, that was an incident, I think on a Saturday or Sunday (I can't remember which day), I was aware there was a Rally in one of our local parks (Mill Hollow Park). I actually drove by that park, coming back from visiting one of my children who live up north, and got back to my home and got a call about 10 minutes later to say that the rally had turned into march/protest/confrontation, which ended up within about 1,000 feet from my front door. So, I immediately walked out my front door, walked down the street, and witnessed first-hand, the end result of that confrontation. It was, again, very unfortunate. Something that you don't want any city to have to go through. Now, just a couple of weeks before that, I'd been with Mayor Mendenhall of Salt Lake City, and joined her and a group of other mayors who were meeting with constituents who had concerns about public safety issues, and excessive use of force.

The back end of this issue—that confrontation, which was very unfortunate, and I think it was agitated by people who don't even live in our community, three who don't even live in our state. Since that meeting, I've encouraged those people who have every right to march, every right to protest, please come and do it right here at City Hall, we have a place to do it. Taking it into the community, I thought was unfortunate. But, again, I respect the right for everybody to have an opinion, I respect everyone's right to disagree with me or disagree with the City, and I'll always listen. But at the end, you make a decision based on all of the facts. An unfortunate situation. After that incident, we had many constituents ask to have that situation evaluated, to take action. Both sides—one side applauding our police officers, the other side saying they were out of line. So, what I did, is I

asked the Attorney General's Office to objectively evaluate our response. It took them several months to do that, and in summary their response was that our Officers and our Police Department acted appropriately in trying to deal with that, again, unfortunate situation.

Ken: What about unfinished business?

Mike: Yes, I know.

Ken: What about the challenges that you think lie ahead?

Mike: Well, there are many challenges, and we've talked about the first administration who starts the city and gets it up and running. I come in and take where they left it and start adding value and building to that, and, just like when I turn over the gavel to the next mayor, I will have many things "tee'd up," ready for that administration to determine how they want to implement, how they want to move forward. There are several issues. 1) We still have on-going open space issues, that we should always be sensitive to and do anything we can to solve. There is one thing we are not making any more of, and that is "open space." Obviously, I'm passionate about that because of my Parks & Rec background. 2) Our Roads are an ongoing issue. Again, we inherited a city that is pretty much all built out. So, everything we have is fairly "aged and worn." We had a five-year-old Road Maintenance Plan that was implemented three years ago, and we still have two years to go. The new administration must complete that plan. 3) Our Storm Water System. A lot of people don't like to look underground, they just want to see what's up top. But, we've had issues where storm water systems or piping is totally rotted away, and it is just pure dirt. When we run into those, we need to take cameras down each one of them, evaluate them and be sure we have resources available to make them fully compliant with the Federal Standards. 4) We need to continue to look at Public Safety. We should never take it for granted that it is "status quo." It is always costly to evaluate. So, I will tee up the new administration, looking at how we can have continued citizen input. I'll look at 5) How we communicate with Special Interest Groups, whomever they might be, so that we are "Hearing Them" and communicating with them. Another big issue for us, one of the highest profile issues is 6) Wasatch Boulevard, which connects Big and Little Cottonwood Canyons. It is the only road in our city which is not owned by our City—it is owned by UDOT. We don't want it to become a freeway! We want it to be maintained as a Boulevard. We want it to have medians, and landscaping, and traffic column measures, and the ability of

residents living above Wasatch to get below Wasatch to get to schools or to stores. 7) We want to create a Wasatch Blvd. Master Plan. This needs to be implemented, which will take a lot of pressure on UDOT. I have this “teed up.” I have a written letter from UDOT that they are supportive of it, but it is too early for it to be implemented. 8) The speed on the roads is another issue. So, a myriad of issues in the waiting. We have things “teed up”, we’ve done a lot of the homework, they are ready to go, but they need to have “follow through” by the next administration, and continuing some of the relationships.

My advantage while working as Mayor, has been my employment with SL County for many years. I built a relationship with many people in SL County. I have sat on numerous Boards, a number of which provide resources to our city. The new Mayor needs to be sure we have representation on these boards. Make sure we still collaborate with Canyons School District, which educates our children. The quality of our educational system here in Cottonwood Heights is outstanding. We have outstanding facilities. The city has a direct relationship in maintaining these great facilities for our children. Our relationship with Salt Lake County needs to be maintained, be it the corridor system or the parks system, for example the 50-acre Crestwood Park must stay as it is—open space, but it should be developed as a park, and people need to know it is there.

I could go on and on. There is always plenty of work for administration to do. My recommendation to the Council is that once, at the end of each year, the Mayor and Council sit down, have a retreat, and prioritize what you are doing the next year. Document it, and give it to the City Manager, saying “This is your roadmap for this year.” Like any plan, it changes, but this should be done every year. We need to keep working on all those things which help us maintain what we have as a beautiful city.

Ken: I recall a criticism of some cities is they do not have a “center”, they don’t have a “core” that draws people. That same criticism has been brought up, from time to time, about the City of Cottonwood Heights--They say “Where is our heart going to be?” “Where is our core?”

Mike: Great point. I think before I ever got on the council, there has always been a desire to try to create some type of a “city center feel.” Some people say, “Well, put it up there in the gravel pit. To me, that is out of sight, out of mind. That is another big issue for the future administration to work on. I believe, that the city center core will be a campus where you have the Rec Center, tied to the City Hall,

tied to the High School, and runs all the way down 2300 East to Hillside Plaza, which eventually becomes more of a “walkable,” User Friendly atmosphere, and it ties to the Library. So, it is a pretty big “footprint”, but if you look at that through walking and active transportation, the Rec Center, High School, City Hall, down 2300 East to the Hillside Plaza Area, to the Library and Post Office, that could be a pretty active City Center. However, City Hall must be tied to that somehow. Something in that area, we’ve been waiting for a Hillside Plaza development to come forward. We’ve had a lot of concerns about people who are hearing rumors that it is going to be an apartment complex. No, absolutely not. We would be opposed to any “high density development.” That is where we would like the roots of our City Center Area focused, with tentacles going out to these other areas. At least, that’s my vision. I don’t think it’s an original one. I think a lot of people are saying that, but it would be right there on 2300 East Ft. Union and spreading out from there.

Ken: Was there ever an event while you have served as Mayor that surprised you? As a close observer, on the council, when you get “the gavel,” is there something about being mayor that surprised you or was more than you expected?

Mike: Absolutely! The thing that probably surprised me the most...not a lot surprised me, as I have been involved in public service in the County, County Commission, and City Council, before. Being in local government has been fine. But, the makeup of the City Council can be challenging, because it had for 10+ years, been cohesive, but very driven with a lot of consensus. When I became mayor, the council changed and there was a lot of difference of opinion in how we should proceed. Therefore, I, as the mayor, had to respect those opinions, because they were elected and had the right to say them. I had to work with the Council and try to find ways to move forward on issues when you have a council that is not 100% On Board with the same Agenda. Now, again, there is much that there was consensus on, but some of the other issues, i.e., like public safety, and some things like that, there was a difference of opinion. So, having to navigate that, and to Chair meetings, and be respectful for all involved, was a challenge. Whenever you have that debate, or challenging personalities, it also attracts those from the public who support one side or the other and have the right to make public comment. So, you’re always respecting those opinions as well. At the end of the day, when you hear all the comments, facts, and information, you still need to take a position. So, when I became mayor, in addition to Covid, in addition to public safety issues, was a City Council that had a different makeup as far as

cohesiveness compared to the past. I respected all of them, they were all dedicated, but they were not all on the same page, which is healthy—but challenging!

Ken: What's the hardest part of this job, that perhaps, very few people can understand except the person who sits in the chair?

Mike: The hardest part of the job, not being able to do all that you would like to do. Never enough money to meet everybody's demands, everybody's needs. That's the hardest thing. You want to provide a level of service to meet everyone's expectations. That's not possible. There is always someone, hopefully not a lot of people, who will be disappointed. My experience has been, 98% of the people are grateful, very supportive of me, have done nothing except express appreciation for the level of transparency we've had, and the sincere desire to serve. It's not extremely hard, but sometimes people will be disappointed, and you don't want anybody to be disappointed, but you respect that sometimes it can't be "yes" to everything.

Ken: I was going to ask you what you savor as being one of the greatest rewards, but I think what you responded to in several instances—talking about the joy of community service, your call to it, your takeaway, I gained the sense, Mayor, that you gain almost as much as you give.

Mike: You know, you are very intuitive for me. My wife and I talked about that, just in the last year when I chose not to run again. You start looking back at your years of service, and what you are doing, and I can sincerely say, It's about the people. It really is, and when you announce that you're not running again, the amount of support and communications that are personal from all walks of life and every direction, recognizing your efforts and desire to do what's right, have been more than enough reward than I could ever ask for. Now, it doesn't mean that people don't get upset with you, it doesn't mean that people don't yell at you. That's okay, that's why we are here—we need to listen to them.

But, again, my reward is just the people. Wherever I go to meet with individuals, it may be a group of 40 or 50 people, or if I'm going to the store and I meet a neighbor, or, with one or two people in the neighborhood, they want to talk about the city. We had a boy killed in my neighborhood several years ago, and the neighbors worked to put in some traffic moderators in the area. If it is speaking to a class at an elementary school, you talk about how public safety

works. I take my fireman's hat because I understand what firemen go through. Or, taking some equipment that our police use. There are so many varieties of opportunities to share with our constituents, our DARE Program, when speaking to the DARE graduates. I could go on and on, and it is just so rewarding, because I don't do all the work. I think a good mayor is someone who gets things done through other people, and I get to be on the "coattails." I have enough experience that I can give my opinions, but getting things done through all those other people, who we serve, is really terrific!

Ken: We save oral history not for today, but for tomorrow. A generation "unborn" may hear these words, many years from now, fifty, one hundred years from now. Let's speak to that generation. With your experience, what guidance would you offer for them, as they say, "Now it's my turn to lead the City of Cottonwood Heights. How would you put your arm around them and say, "Let's keep this in mind?"

Mike: Fundamentally, I guess, the thing that I've learned, is that everyone has a right to have an opinion, and we need to respect that right. Don't close those opinions off. Secondly, I would say that you don't make a decision, until you get all the facts. Often, I've heard this from others, as well, that you'll get a complaint or a concern, and the complaint/concern comes in taking a position. Make sure you always get the other side of the story, and you communicate with both sides, and usually, it's something in between. So, respect everybody's opinion, get all the facts, and more than anything else, make sure that there is always good communication. I think in any organization, success is based on how well you communicate with all those people you serve, and it takes several facets. It can be the City Newsletter, when returning phone calls, it can be meeting with people in the community, or public comment, always maintain good communication. And then, do not be afraid to take a position once you have all the facts.

Ken: What do you hope future generations seize as the value of [current] work? Do you still think they'll be getting returns on the investments your administration has made, and previous administrations have made?

Mike: Yes! Absolutely! Again, I think, the administrations before me created a strong foundation, and you can't build anything up until you get a good foundation. Luckily, we have an outstanding foundation. While continuing to build on that foundation, I hope those who replace me and replace those who follow, will continue to build on that foundation, which is having a community that

people have a desire to live in. Like my son. Once he got married, he wanted to come back to Cottonwood Heights to live. And, we have a Thanksgiving 5K Race every morning with 2,000 people, who want to come back and be in that event, because it is a great atmosphere, a great environment. We want an environment in our whole city that attracts the people who want to be here. Okay, so the great foundation we had from the beginning, I've tried to build on that, we want to continue to build on that and what you have is a quality of life, experience and opportunity here in Cottonwood Heights, that is "second to none" across our valley.

You know, Cottonwood Heights has challenges. We don't have the ability to plan up front—we are all built out. So you are having to re-develop, and re-define, and re-assess, and maintain and upkeep everything we are doing.

Ken: I always reserve one final opportunity for that which we did not address. Our hour has flown by so quickly, but is there anything else that you would like to share, any recollection, any thought, any wisdom, in the final moment?

Mike: Well, I think one thing, you talk about this being oral history, and you talk about my passion for public service (that is my passion—I love it), and it sincerely is about the people, it is not about me. Obviously, we don't do this for the money, as we're not paid a lot. It is something you just need to love to do. But, when I say it's about the people, I'm excited how our city has involved the citizens. Obviously, you're sitting here as a professional doing oral history, as a volunteer on our historic committee. You have many other members on that historic committee who give a lot of hours. One of them is creating a written history of our city. We have an Arts Council, which is made up of citizens about protecting the Arts in our community. OK, when I became mayor, one of my personal accomplishments we didn't mention, was that one of the first things that I did, was create a Parks, Trails, and Open Space Committee, as we did not have one of those. It has 15 members. They helped create the Green Space additions to our community, looked at parks and trails activities in our community, and other improvements for parks and trails. There are other committees like that, where citizens can stay involved and have direct input on how we maintain the level that we want to have as far as quality in these various areas.

I guess my final comment is that the community recognizes that is the way it really works, just to be involved in your community, be a member of a committee, speak

out to those things you'd like to see and, hopefully, those who come on after me, just keep building on that tradition.

Ken: Mayor Michael Peterson—Thank you!

Mike: You're Welcome.