

24-02-23 TheBuzz web

📅 Thu, Feb 22, 2024 4:51PM 🕒 27:22

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

tucson, romero, neighborhood, city, community, trees, mayor, perez, bus, infrastructure, bridge, president, president biden, park, water, investments, christopher conover, federal funds, 22nd, people

SPEAKERS

Carmen, Regina Romero, Nicole Cox, Lane Santa Cruz, unknown, Charlene Mendoza, Tom Perez, Christopher Conover

- C** Christopher Conover 00:04

Welcome to The Buzz. I'm Christopher Conover. This week, what happens when Washington comes to town. On Tuesday, Tucson Mayor Regina Romero held a news conference at the opening of a new neighborhood park on the city's south side. The project is among several that had been paid for with funds from large federal spending bills. And she thanked President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris for the investment.
- R** Regina Romero 00:34

Because they fought for these investments. The residents of the city of Tucson are benefiting from their vision.
- C** Christopher Conover 00:41

Lane Santa Cruz, the city council member who represents the neighborhood where the natural park sits was one of the speakers.
- L** Lane Santa Cruz 00:49

Now I'm a big advocate for having more of these in our community because, a lot of times, we think of parks and we think of green lawns. Well, that's not sustainable in the desert. And so how do we use what we have at the vegetation, the natural desert landscape at our disposal.
- C** Christopher Conover 01:07

As was Tom Perez. He's a senior adviser to the president and the director of the White House's Office of Intergovernmental Affairs

- T** Tom Perez 01:16
There has never been, in our lifetime, a more robust investment in building America, building out our infrastructure, making sure in that process that we view everything through that equity lens, understanding that ZIP code will no longer determine destiny.
- C** Christopher Conover 01:37
The media event was the final part of a tour that Romero Santa Cruz and others gave Perez, showing him how recent federal dollars have been spent in Tucson. Such tours are not uncommon. In fact, Perez wasn't the only federal official who Romero met with that day in Tucson. So what goes on when Washington comes to town? The Buzz was invited to tag along for the tour.
- T** Tom Perez 02:05
Oh, it's great to see you.
- C** Christopher Conover 02:09
The today started when Perez arrived at City Hall being greeted by the mayor before hopping on one of the new city buses that was paid for in part with federal dollars
- R** Regina Romero 02:19
An electric kneeling bus. And it's 100%, fully electric. And we purchase these buses with \$21 million from the Federal Transit Administration through the Inflation Reduction Act. So it was an opportunity that we applied for. The city of Tucson was ready because we created our climate action and adaptation plan. It's called Tucson Resilient Together. So one of our commitments is to be zero emissions by 2030 internally as a city, and by 2025, all of our bus fleet will be low-to-zero emission fleet by 2025. And that couldn't have happened without the vision and really going after the Inflation Reduction Act.
- T** Tom Perez 02:25
It's incredible to see
- U** unknown 02:28
Mayor, this is Carmen.

C Christopher Conover 02:37
They briefly chatted with their bus driver as they got on board. This is Tom Perez, senior adviser to President Biden

T Tom Perez 03:32
Tienes tu autobus?

C Carmen 03:36
Si

T Tom Perez 03:37
Qual es distinto?

R Regina Romero 03:46
When I was running for mayor the first time around in 2019, we set a initiative, a goal of planting a million trees by 2030. And as you well know, planting trees is a nature-based approach to climate change. And it really helps in so many different ways. And the way that we wanted to do it in Tucson was with an equity lens, and so we created an equity map as to where we were going to plant the trees, right? Prioritize our trees, our tree planting. The first thing that I did as mayor was create a partnership between a nonprofit organization which is Trees For Tucson and our for-profit partners companies in our community that wanted to invest in our million trees effort. And so Tucson Clean and Beautiful, which is also called Trees For Tucson was our nonprofit partner of the mayor's office with the city, and then our for-profit partners, we started fundraising and putting it through the nonprofit organization. I fund raised about \$850,000

C Carmen 03:47
Es muy rapido

T Tom Perez 03:48
[laughs]

C Christopher Conover 03:50
Romero led off by detailing efforts to plant more trees within city limits.

T Tom Perez 03:57
Of non-government funds?

R Regina Romero 05:14
Non-government funds to plant to plant trees. And most recently, we received a \$5.1 million grant from the urban forest report program . . .

T Tom Perez 05:27
Right, USDA

R Regina Romero 05:28
Which will continue feeding our Tucson Million Trees Initiative

L Lane Santa Cruz 05:33
And it's just like with clean buses and your tree initiative. If you don't have a partner, you can't scale it. And if you can't scale it, we're gonna be here till the cows come

R Regina Romero 05:48
Exactly.

C Christopher Conover 05:49
Romero told Perez that these efforts were largely focused on traditionally disadvantaged neighborhoods.

T Tom Perez 05:55
Yeah, no, absolutely. I mean, you said something a couple of minutes ago that resonated, which is that one of the under discussed, executive actions that the President took quite literally, it may have been day one, it wasn't day one, it was week one, was an executive order on equity, because we knew they'll remember back January '21. We're in the throes of COVID. We have a COVID-induced recession that we have to climb out of. And we knew that there was going to be an unprecedented set of opportunities, because moments of greatest crisis are also moments of greatest opportunity. You look back at our history, you know, the Great Depression, you know, we built Social Security, we built the New Deal. You know, those

moments we do that. And the thing that I appreciate, and the President appreciates about what you've done as you've really taken the equity executive action to heart. I mean, look, we're going to be going. When you when you have buses like this going through communities. And you know, that communities that are often most affected by toxic waste dumps, you know, all sorts of environmental justice challenges are disproportionately communities color.

C Charlene Mendoza 07:17

Everyone who take a moment to look around where we are right now.

C Christopher Conover 07:20

That's Charlene Mendoza, Mayor Romero's Chief of Staff

C Charlene Mendoza 07:24

is going to be looking up at the 22nd Street Revitalization Project. But what you're seeing here, as we move through, is the neighborhoods that this bus actually can't get to.

C Christopher Conover 07:35

Perez says that equity is a big piece of how officials decide which projects get funding and Mayor Romero reiterates that point.

R Regina Romero 07:44

All of the federal funds that we have been receiving, like you said, we've taken it to heart, the equity piece. Because like these neighborhoods, as Charlene mentioned, these neighborhoods have been historically disinvested in and I just want you to, we're gonna go and take a look at the neighborhoods surrounding the 22nd Street Bridge that have been historically disinvested neighborhoods are less than a quarter mile away from the University of Arizona. So it . . . their lack of infrastructure, in terms of getting to the U of A has been a barrier to many of these neighborhoods. And the kids that are growing up there.

T Tom Perez 08:33

It's a cruel irony.

R Regina Romero 08:33

Isn't it incredible?

T Tom Perez 08:35

Walkable to a world class institution. But you really can't get to that looks like one of the stadiums, that's their football stadium. Right?

R Regina Romero 08:43

Yes, absolutely.

T Tom Perez 08:44

The critical thing about the partnership is, you know, President Biden laid out the vision of equity, but you all are in the best position to know how that translates into your community. Which is why, you know, it's kind of the definition of synergy, you know, when you bring two things together, and the whole is that much better than the sum of the parts because I don't, I'm starting to learn this history, you know, a half a mile from a world class institution that you know, that there are those, that barrier and I'm inspired to know that you're doing some about it.

L Lane Santa Cruz 09:25

Well, one of the other pieces that we use as an opportunity during the pandemic, with the federal funds was to make transit, they're free.

C Christopher Conover 09:32

That's Ward one council member lane, Santa Cruz.

L Lane Santa Cruz 09:36

The city continues to invest in making sure that that stays accessible to our community, because we know who rides the bus are folks that don't have another option to get around, and also limited income. So that's been . . . A number of cities have done that, and I [inaudible] it every time. By the way, I see a Job Corps Center there if I'm not mistaken. Yes, this is Job Corps As a former labor secretary. I'm always looking for job centers.

R Regina Romero 09:59

So this is the 22nd Street area. This is the bridge that we've been talking about, we received a \$25 million race grant from the Bipartisan Infrastructure bill. And the reason it's important to be here and see it view it is because this is one of the infrastructure barriers that our children on the other side of the neighborhood, have in front of us, right? Railroad, huge, busy highway, and a bridge that is very unfriendly to pedestrians and bicycle.

C Christopher Conover 10:40

Rebuilding the 22nd Street Bridge has been talked about for more than a decade, the bridge has a 15 ton weight limit.

R Regina Romero 10:48

So we can't write this bus over 22nd Street Bridge because it can't hold it because it's dangerous,

T Tom Perez 10:54

Seriously?

R Regina Romero 10:54

To be able to ride, school buses cannot ride them, trucks cannot ride it, emergency vehicles cannot drive on it because it is so dangerous of failure. That what happens with some term buses and school buses and emergency vehicles, and fire trucks and commercial trucks, they have to go through the neighborhood on the other side of the neighborhood. And so when you were saying, Tom, that low income neighborhoods and communities of color are the first and worst hit by climate and the effects of greenhouse gas emissions and emissions from these huge vehicles, they're going through the neighborhood and leaving their emissions there. And so it's affecting the neighborhood with traffic and heavy, heavy traffic. And you know, the emissions that are left to the children in that neighborhood and that in the seniors and the peoples.

C Christopher Conover 11:59

Let me ask a quick question, if I could, as you've as Secretary of Labor years ago, and now in this role, are these typical things, you're hearing about infrastructure? And I'm sure when they built the 22nd Street Bridge, it was there was a big ribbon cutting ceremony and how great it was. But now looking back on it, maybe not such a good idea is this typical of the kind of things you see and are trying to fix?

T Tom Perez 12:27

a big part of infrastructure projects in the '60s, which is why there's an initiative that we call Reconnecting Communities. I grew up in Buffalo, New York, and in the 1960s, they built an expressway, so that, quite frankly, the white people from the suburbs could get to downtown a lot faster. And where did they . . . what what community did they completely dissect? It was the black community in the east side of Buffalo. As a result of the Reconnecting Communities Initiative, they have just gotten the final green light to reconnect that community. If you go to one of the largest infrastructure projects in America right now is the Brent Spence Bridge,

which connects Northern Kentucky, to Cincinnati. That was number two or number three, on the list of nationally listed projects. And the prior president, famously stood in front of it and said, 'We're going to replace this bridge,' and famously, infamously did nothing. That bridge is now being done. And part of that, when that bridge was built in the '60s, it dissected the black community in Cincinnati. So, you know, as we think about infrastructure, it's not simply about getting people places faster and cleaner. It's about understanding how we truly do reconnect communities to make sure that no community is left behind. That's a big part of the legacy of this Eisenhower moment that we're living.

C Christopher Conover 14:11

You're listening to The Buzz. I'm Christopher Conover. We're behind the scenes of a recent tour that Tucson Mayor Regina Romero gave to Tom Perez, a senior adviser in the White House. The next stop of projects that federal dollars helped pay for is a facility that's removing dangerous chemicals from an area aquifer, including the chemicals known as PFAS. Perez sees a parallel between work on the PFAS problem and another water crisis that caught national attention.

L Lane Santa Cruz 14:43

When the Flint water crisis occurred. It awakened the nation to the notion that like every time you're going to your water supply at home, you're putting your life in danger. But I think there was a sense that oh, you know, poor Flint, but that's an isolated incident. It's anything but and that's why, you know, the President's commitment to replacing, you know, all the lead pipes. So not just getting lead out of the water but addressing

R Regina Romero 15:16

And PFAS remediation.

T Tom Perez 15:17

I was just in Wausau, Wisconsin. They did they just build a whole new, you know, water treatment infrastructure with ARPA dollars, because they had a major feedback problem.

R Regina Romero 15:29

Yes. And the City of Tucson and Tucson Water have been benefiting from the investments that President Biden pushed for through the Inflation Reduction Act to remediate PFAS, we started finding PFAS in our water system about five, six years ago, and to some water through mayor and council action, we said no, we will pick up the remediation costs knowing that we were not causing that contamination in our system, right, that's a Department of Defense problem with DM, Davis Monthan. And the Air National Guard that is at Tucson Airport. So but the city of Tucson has picked up about \$50 million in remediation, because we want to make sure that Tucsonans feel that our water is safe to drink.

T Tom Perez 16:35

There are some things that are on the nice-to-do list. And there's some things that

R Regina Romero 16:40

we have to do.

T Tom Perez 16:41

We have-to-do-list, we have to do it. Because we know the science. And one thing that's been helpful, you know, indispensable about this, these investments and how communities are able to pick up the pace and there's such a better understanding of PFAS. And it's you know, it's its unfortunate ubiquitousness in so many communities.

C Christopher Conover 17:06

You said a lot of cities, obviously are dealing with this, but it sounds like Tucson might be ahead of the game a little bit, not waiting just for the federal dollars, but using that to backfill in

T Tom Perez 17:17

Yeah, no, I mean, Tucson has been ahead of the curve on a host of things. PFAS is one, we're gonna go see the tree planting, and they're way ahead of other communities in understanding the opportunities and, you know, they were one of the first cities that applied for and got the buses that were under the IRA and I mean, the the science has become compelling on this. We don't need to sit here and debate whether you want to have PFAS in your drinking water. And and so I really commend the mayor and the council and folks around here for getting ahead of that. I'm proud of what we've been able to do. At the same time, I am acutely aware that what the federal government has been able to do only begins to meet the moment. And that's why DoD is really important, because obviously, a big source of the problem, you know, was, you know, Davis Monthan. And it's that's not a unique challenge to here. I mean, these these issues are, you know, you got to you got to facilities, US bases, literally around the world are dealing with these challenges.

R Regina Romero 18:38

But it is it really the the federal funds and being able to direct them to cities directly, has been an incredible game changer to the benefits of how we put them to work, right? As an American, you know, the 33rd largest city in this country and a mayor of a large American city, to be able to have the funds to put them to work to the needs that we have, is transformational, and once in a lifetime opportunity. So that's why for us like I just talked to you about \$33.5 million. In

terms of PFAS remediation. We talked about \$25 million dollars from federal funds for 22nd Street Bridge, \$21.5 million for electric buses. Let's make the math let's do the math here. Millions and millions of dollars for tangible benefits for . . .

T Tom Perez 19:47

I mean there was I mean there was \$3 billion just from infrastructure bill for Arizona.

C Christopher Conover 19:53

As we approach our final destination Romero begins telling Perez about the area's history.

R Regina Romero 19:59

This neighborhood is Rose Neighborhood one of the areas that was highly impacted by the construction of Interstate 19. And there was flooding. And this particular, the neighbors decided through the work of council members and Santa Cruz's office and the work that we did with our Tucson Million Trees. The neighbors decided that they wanted to pick up a city-owned parcel. And that was a really troublesome site, right? It was, there was an area where people throw trash and was wildcat dumping. And so all we started working my climate and sustainability advisor with our nonprofit organization Trees For Tucson, which we partnered with, to plan our million trees with the word one office and the neighbors. And they're the ones that said we want something done in this park. I partnered with Mr. Carwash, our private partner, and Mr. Carwash committed \$150,000 to plant trees and create this green space in Rose Neighborhood, it's called Lamar Park. We're gonna meet with a neighborhood association vice president and other folks within the city of Tucson. But you want to jump in and you want to tell us a little bit about.

L Lane Santa Cruz 21:30

Yeah, so this would be other another sin of the freeway that when they feel from the culvert boxes for when it rains in the flooding, that they weren't big enough. So it rains, the water can flow to the river. So it backs up into into the neighborhood. So when with the infrastructure, that with with the park and the rainwater harvesting, and that that's part of the park, it's helping alleviate some of the flooding that happens with the wash, you know, trying to move into into the river.

R Regina Romero 22:06

So besides planting trees, Tom, we're also planting water. So we're doing green infrastructure to help water our our trees.

T Tom Perez 22:17

That was going to be my next question. I walked right into that one.

R

Regina Romero 22:20

Native drought-tolerant trees, where you're you're going to see some berms and how we plant and we use rainwater to water our native trees so that we don't have to use as much potable water. And so you're gonna see tiny trees because we just did the planting. And there's some mature trees that weren't here already. But this is Lamar Park is a perfect example of and nature,

L

Lane Santa Cruz 22:55

natural desert park.

C

Christopher Conover 22:57

And with that, the bus arrives and people begin to file out to the news conference. A couple of days later, we caught up with Mayor Romero to ask her how she thought the visit went.

R

Regina Romero 23:10

I believe that President Biden wants to make sure that his advisors and his team of secretaries of all of the departments in the federal government are seeing firsthand the impact of how the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the Inflation Reduction Act is working for people. Because at the end of the day, knowing President Biden and you know, serving on his reelection campaign advisory board, knowing where he's coming from, he really wants to take care of people, of working families. That he has been absolutely clear on. And so they really want to talk about the stories and see the people and see firsthand in a tangible way. How these investments are making a difference.

C

Christopher Conover 24:13

He mentioned a couple of times, especially during the news conference, that somehow when it comes to getting federal funding Tucson, and therefore you as the Mayor of Tucson are always right at the front of the line. You had a chance obviously not only on the tour, but afterwards to meet with him briefly privately as officials will do. And then you moved off to another meeting because there was an assistant secretary out of Department of Interior who was here to announce some good things for Arizona the next day. Are these also a good chance for you to make sure that we're staying at the front of the line and if you can tell us if you were pushing for anything what the next thing you were trying to get from either of those folks were?

R

Regina Romero 25:04

My intent in my conversations with President and all of the secretaries of his departments. And in this case, the senior advisor and the assistant secretary for the Department of Interior, is to

in this case, the senior advisor and the assistant secretary for the Department of Interior, is to showcase what the City of Tucson and its mayor and council have been able to do. And it really gives me reassurance that my vision for our city is headed in the right way, right? and that it's very aligned with president's Biden agenda of investing in our country, and in my position and investing in Tucson, and our people. So that alignment is something that we've been able to use to be successful in applying for the federal funds that have become available, right? The alignment of policy priorities is absolutely something that we have a leg up on. And I'm going to continue making sure that we continue getting in that line because we're ready to go and it's based on what Tucsonans want to see happen into the future of our city.

C Christopher Conover 26:25

Well, thanks for catching up with us after the tour, and thanks for inviting us to be a fly on the wall during the tour.

R Regina Romero 26:33

I'm so glad that you were there. Thank you so much for joining us.

C Christopher Conover 26:36

And that's The Buzz for this week. Tune in next week as we ask what control a state has a federal border. You can find all our episodes online at azpm.org, subscribe to our show wherever you get your podcast just search for The Buzz Arizona. We're also on the NPR app. Zac Ziegler is our producer. Our music is by Enter the Haggis. I'm Christopher Conover. Thanks for listening.

N Nicole Cox 27:13

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