

[show theme]

CC: Welcome to the Buzz. I'm Christopher Conover. This week, the end of an era in Tucson city government

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Come Monday, Steve Kozachik will no longer be the ward six representative on the Tucson City Council. He's among the longest serving members of the Tucson City Council.

He and council member Richard Fimbres were first elected in 2009. 2 years after Mayor Regina Romero was voted in as a council member.

Kozachik started that time as the council's lone Republican though he switched parties before he ran for reelection in 2013. He has routinely been known for being the member of the council who was often ready with questions in meetings and accessible to the public and the media.

Kozachik isn't retiring though. He's taking a job heading up construction and management of Pima County's new Mosaic Quarter Complex that will expand the sports offerings on Tucson's south side near the Kino Sports Complex.

We sat down with Kozachik at the start of this week, his last in office.

1:20

CC: So I think, you know, the easiest place to start with is, you and I have been having chats for over a decade. You sent out the letter talking about, you know, leaving the city but walk us through a little bit your thought process you've become an institution and the institutions leave.

1:42

Steve Kozachik: Well, I started this conversation with Chuck Huckleberry a few years ago, when Mosaic Quarter was just in the design phase and of course, Chuck is gone, but continue the conversation with Jan [Leshner], Carmine Debonis, and once the board of supervisors passed the vote a couple weeks ago and approved the lease for Mosaic thought the timing was perfect.

I realize I'm, you know, part way through a term, but opportunities like this don't, don't, don't just fall off a tree and every day. And this is really, I believe Mosaic is gonna be a transformational project, not just for Tucson and Southern Arizona, but just regionally. And so the opportunity to kind of get back in the drill of helping to manage a multi sports complex is, something that you just don't get every day.

2:29

CC: And that is your background, less people forget you did that at the U A for a long time.

2:34

SK: 32 years, worked in intercollegiate athletics, ICA, and literally every room in every level of McKale Center was renovated at some level during the time I was there. That's everything from the ground floor where we did the men's basketball locker rooms and the volleyball rooms, replacing the arena floor, up into the rafters where we redid the sound system as well.

So, yeah, so it's kind of going home. This is truly youth and amateur sports though, which is not something college sports is necessarily these days. But this is gonna be good, it's going home and again, this will be a transformational project for the region.

3:12

CC: So looking back at your time on the city council, the obvious question is, what are you most proud of in all that time?

3:23

SK: I think that we have done an excellent job out of this ward office. So it's not, first of all, it's not just me. I've got a staff, all of us who do these jobs, have a wife, a family. And they're, they're a part of this because these are time crunching jobs.

I'm here, I'm in this office seven days a week. And so I think that to rephrase your question, what, what are we most proud of as a team is our constituent work? And that is someone, someone's dog is barking at two o'clock in the morning to some of my trash didn't get picked up. That might sound like little stuff and it is in the big picture. But for somebody trash.

4:02

CC: Until it's your trash.

4:05

Yeah. Or you're getting up at two o'clock in the morning for somebody to, to call and, and actually get an answer and a response and somebody who cares about your issue is a big deal to constituents. So, our constituent outreach has been, I think top drawer from a policy standpoint, You know, we're, we're sitting here in the ward six office across the street from the, from the Benedictine Monastery, having gone through a very long and sometimes contentious rezoning process on that and have it turn out as the is the preservation of the monastery in perpetuity. That's something that forever we'll be able to look at and, and appreciate as, as a community.

We have gone through some very significant rezoning processes that really require getting the Hatfields and the McCoys in the same room at the same time to kind of hash out the the deal points.

That's not easy stuff and, and people kind of looking from the outside wonder why was that so difficult? It's because everybody's got their own perspective and their own needs and their own desires. And so being able to, to craft public policy in a way that kind of where the concentric

circles overlap, find that sweet spot in the middle again, not something that you do quickly and easily, but you spend spend time doing, I think from a personal standpoint though.

One thing I'll take away from this is I'm, I'm kind of a critter guy. And so being able to play a role in shutting down Tucson Greyhound Park, the animal, animal abuse that went on out there is a thing of the past now. And so I'm happy to be a part of that.

5:40

CC: I remember when you were running for your first election, you were running as a Republican, Democrats trying to paint you as a Tea Party Republican. You eventually became a Democrat and it seemed like your role on the council became the guy with the question. Wait a minute, why are we doing this? How did, how do you see your time on the council morphing politically to become very often that question on the council?

6:09

SK: So you are in the news business. And so you recognize how polarized politically, not just regionally but nationally we are. I think that's unfortunate. We have lost the ability to find that big bell curve in the middle.

Most of us are a little to the left, a little bit to the right, right? Now, the narrative is being driven by the extremes, the far left and the far right. On the council, I have tried to stay kind of in the middle of that bell curve and, and, and question staff and question business representatives, question constituents saying, wait a minute, are, are you sure? And get the follow up and get the dialogue going so that we can, we can find a good spot in the middle.

When I started this, Christopher, we were facing a \$40 or \$50 million deficit coming right out of the right out of the recession. That was a necessary time to be laying out the spreadsheets and, and crunching the data and frankly, that, that was new at the council. Council members didn't come and, and open up spreadsheets and, and question staff and the budget staff about why are we spending dollars over here is a duplicative and, and all of that, that is now a transformational sort of culture at the council.

Now, you'll, you'll notice during budget season, the council members are coming in with a list of questions, and so I'm glad to have been a part of that kind of culture shift. But it's, I think it's healthy for the council, healthy for the governing board and it's healthy for city staff also to be questioned and they have to defend the positions that they come to the table with.

7:42

CC: There have been some times since you've been on the council and some of them you've been right in the middle of where the state legislature frankly has almost passed laws aimed at things that the city council has done. The gun buyback program comes to mind that you spearheaded. It seems like I'm guessing you're a little bit proud of that at times that you poked the bear up in Phoenix a little bit.

8:05

SK: We're a little blue dot in a big red state, and that's no surprise to the folks up in Phoenix. And you're right, there have been more times than I can count where they have crafted legislation in Phoenix that only applied to a jurisdiction of 500,000 or more, so you're, you're talking about Tucson and Phoenix. That's pretty typical from the state legislature, and again, it's another example of how polarized we are.

We, from a political standpoint, that we can't sit down in the state legislature, can't sit down either amongst themselves or come down here and work with governing bodies down here to, to look at local conditions and look at local issues and say, really, that's kind of your stuff at a local level, you kind of figure it out.

You, you saw last week that the governor had to veto a zoning bill that may sound very bland. But on its face, it is really the state legislature trying to take over local zoning discussion, zoning considerations.

The gun buyback, as you mentioned, was another example where,, all I did was ask people if they would like to surrender weapons that they wanted out of their, out of their homes and have the city dispose of them for them.

At the same time that buyback was going on, there was a group of right wing legislators standing out in the public, right of way was signed, saying cash for guns and intercepting, I was offering \$50 Safeway gift cards, intercepting guns and buying the kind of cool ones and air quotes on that, that people were bringing up for us and we'll give you a \$200 for your gun instead of that lousy \$50 gift card.

State legislatures saw that, and shortly thereafter in that same session passed a bill saying it is now illegal for local jurisdictions to destroy a weapon, even if you, as a property owner, turned over to us just for that express purpose.

And, during that buy back, I had people coming up, I remember an elderly woman came up and said, 'my husband died a few years ago. These guns have been sitting in the garage. I've got grandkids. I just want them out of circulation.'

That's what we were, that's, is this wasn't sort of a, a grab and, you know, confiscate people's weapons thing. So, yeah, the state legislature has more often than not been a thorn, and now we have a situation where there's a governor up there who's probably gonna make a career out of vetoing bills to, to protect local decision making home rule matters.

And, and I'm glad that Katie Hobbs recognizes that one of the things.

10:40

CC: After you announced that you were leaving the position, a lot of people said to me is, wait, what happens with all the recycling programs? You really got known for that. It was at first

behind the ward office. Now it's in a parking lot across the street from the ward office, the glass recycling bins. I remember you were out there yourself pulverizing the glass and of course, the plastic bags and, and all of that, what happens to all those programs now that you're leaving?

11:06

SK" Well, they stay in place. We really have, have them up and running. We're working, we have a service agreement that has been signed with ByFusion. They are coming to Tucson once that facility is up and running and it's in design right now.

Once the facility is up and running, Tucson will be the first city in the world literally to stand up a recycling facility, or reuse facility is a better way to phrase it, for non recyclable plastics at scale, we have other jurisdictions all over the country watching what we're doing and they'll copy, you know, some of what we're doing and they'll learn from our mistakes.

We right now have gathered over 240 tons of plastic since this began a year and a half ago. That's a credit to the community, you know, when I started the pilot program in August of '22? Yeah, '22, we set a kind of a random goal between August and the end of the year to see if we could gather 20 tons, that's 20 tons of saran wrap and plastic bags and water bottles, not 20 tons of concrete. Thought it was a big number, by before the end of the year, we were at 35 tons and now we're, like I said, 240 tons.

That's to the credit of this community, who cared enough to gather the stuff up in their homes, bring it down to the ward office and, and, and drop it off. People are coming here all the time every single day. If you go over and stand in that parking lot across the street, you'll see a steady flow of cars seven days a week.

12:37

CC: Yeah, Monday afternoon, when we're talking, as we drove in, there were cars circulating through there. I've come through on weekends and see darn near a line.

12:45

SK: Yeah, it, it's an immensely popular program and so the, the council will carry that through where we have the agreement in place and ByFusion will be in Tucson around the end of the year, standing up their own operation, churning out the blocks. I've already put them in touch with four different general contractors. We have projects that are going up right now in Tucson and and all over the country, so this is gonna be a good deal for the community.

13:12

CC: Looking back again as you begin to transition to the new job, we talked about some things you were proud of. Is there something sitting on the table that you just think? Boy, I wish I could have gotten that done before this new opportunity came along?

13:25

SK: Well, I think the ByFusion is, is a good example of that. You know, you, you kind of birth a program and you'd like to, to see it across the finish line and yet it's far enough along now where I know that's not gonna come off the rails.

From a policy standpoint, I would have preferred to see the city take and still would prefer to see the city take a more expansive role in how we address the homelessness issue in Tucson. The City of Tucson right now focuses on a program called Housing First, which for a relatively small component of the houseless community, it works.

But for the people who are strung out on opioids, the people who are, have serious mental illnesses, people who have are chronically homeless and living in alleys and under bridges and out in the middle of a desert, they're not gonna thrive in a housing first setting.

And so I would have preferred to see the city build a large or buy a large non-barrier congregate shelter principally for single males, because that's the largest cohort. That's something I think that we, that we still need to get done and something I would have liked to see come across,, you know, come, come across our desk as a, as a box so we could check as we walk out the door.

14:40

CC: So let's talk about your future, Mosaic. We mentioned at the beginning of this interview, it's gonna be a big deal, and an area that has tried to have some development before in the past, but,, nothing has really stuck down there.

14:57

SK: So I'm one of those guys who believes that,, the Kino baseball stadium should have been built downtown. It was put out where it is right now for grossly political reasons, but it's out there.

We have since lost spring training, and we're not gonna get that back largely because we would need three professional teams down here, and the Phoenix area has made an immense investment in their spring training facilities.

So what do we do with the Kino Sports Complex? Mosaic is gonna be a perfect, multi sports complex to draw synergies between Mosaic and Kino and draw and breathe some life back into those facilities that Kino has. They have 11 soccer fields. They have the professional soccer field, they've still got a baseball stadium and they have some indoor facilities as well.

Mosaic, once it's up and running even iteratively, they'll have the ice plex, they'll have the arena, they'll have a sports plex, they'll have an outdoor pavilion that they can use for for outdoor events, community events and being able to bring synergies between those two complexes is gonna be really important for, as I say, breathing life back into the Kino Sports Complex, which has really been kind of inching along and surviving, but we can do better.

And this is an opportunity for us regionally to do that to do better with both Kino and Mosaic simultaneously.

16:17

CC: Talking about constituent services earlier, you're a runner. Those of us who know you see all over town. Does this mean you get peaceful runs now with nobody stopping you and asking you questions?

16:28

SK: Well, it means I'll get shorter runs now because I'm not gonna have three hours in the morning to spend out on the loop, but that's ok. My knees will be thankful for that in the long run.

16:38

CC: All right. Well, thanks for sitting down with us.

16:40

SK: I appreciate you coming over.

16:42

CC: That was Tucson City council member, Steve Kozachik who leaves office on April 1st on Wednesday.

Kozachik's office held an informal get together that was open to the public at The Shanty, a bar that's been a fixture of a well known part of the ward he represents, the Fourth Avenue Shopping District.

We spoke with attendees and well wishers first among them, Randy Dorman.

17:08

RD: It's the end of an era essentially. And there's so many things about Steve, but I think the best is that he was always an independent thinker, a transparent thinker. He has a passion for making this community better and doing the right thing in a way that many politicians don't even when it's unpopular, he's unfazed.

In fact, he sometimes likes it when it's not popular, as long as he's doing the right thing for the community. And I really love just how he explains exactly why he's thinking something so that even if you don't agree with him, you understand where it's from and that is the beginning to finding common ground.

18:00

CC: You bring up something interesting. Even when it's not popular, Steve has certainly not always been on the popular sides of things. He certainly has gotten under the skin of the legislature, but that doesn't stop him.

RD: It seems if he believes in something, I think that that is his magic formula. It's all about what he thinks is right? And he's not swayed by politics, he's not swayed by, he's not really swayed by anything except finding what he thinks is really the right answer.

And I mean, if you recall when he first was elected Republican, you know, the Museum of Contemporary Art is near and dear to me. And in the beginning, he was protesting in front of there, fast forward just a year or two later. And when he actually learned about what we did and spent time with us, he became one of our biggest advocates.

So I also love that he is open minded and is always seeking more information to make a more informed decision. Steve is irreplaceable.

19:13

CC: Whoever takes this seat and then eventually whoever runs for the full term, do they try and be Steve or do they need to be themselves?

19:23

RD: They need to be themselves. I think in this community, we always need to be looking forward. And I think that Steve being so independent is a characteristic of Ward Six. So I would assume that the person selected will share in that quality, but they have to carve their own path and create their own relationship with their constituents.

And Tucson is always changing. They have to look at what's coming next for this community and be an advocate for that.

20:02

CC: We also spoke with Julianne Hurst, Neil Williams and Margaret Drugay. Hurst led off by telling us that she's known Kozachik since they were young to start,

JH: We went to high school together and it started there and then he just started doing so much for the city of Tucson from just his accessibility and honesty to the block program to his rabid defense of the planet and Ward six and other places in Tucson. He's just such an amazing person. I just, we're going to miss him so much.

20:43

CC: I feel like we should ask you questions about school, Steve. But we, we'll save that for another time.

20:48

JH: Let me tell you this one time. No, I'm not.

20:52

CC: We'll, we'll save those for another show.

20:55

NW: Maybe when her husband isn't sitting right here.

21:00

CC: Exactly. So, what's your favorite memory?

21:02

MD: Well, I became the president of our neighborhood association several years ago and was immediately thrown into a lot of controversy. And Steve was my go to person and has been just a stone column who has helped with anything I have ever asked of him. He never refuses a request. He may not have the answer, but he would always find out and he's just so easygoing and was so good to work with that I just became enamored. And he has a brain unbelievably invented the plastics that are now being made into furniture and buildings are his brainchild, and I am happily bringing thousands of pounds here just because of Steve.

22:05

CC: You bring up something that when we talked to Steve the other day, we asked him, of course, what are you most proud of? And you hit on it. It's constituent work. That's what he kept coming back to over and over again, the work he does for the people in the world and the people in the city who might not even be in this.

22:14

MD: And you know what it's beyond the city. Now, this has now become not only national but it's going to be international. He just has visions that astound me.

CC: So one of the characteristics of Steve, I think everybody would agree on. At least those of us who know him as Steve Kozachik, the public figure is, he never shies away from a fight if he believes he is correct since you've known him so long? Is that new or has he always been that way?

23:03

JH: He's always been that way. And he has a different clock. I think his clock has 36 hours in every day. I can't believe how much he gets done and he's at every meeting. He, he's always in there. He's ready to dig in

23:22

CC: As the event was winding down, we checked in with Kozachik again

When we were talking yesterday, you told us about this and you said, I, I don't know if anybody is gonna come. You seem to have filled the place, surprised?

23:37

SK: It was the free food. No, I mean, you know, our, our community, our community is really engaged and we're a big, small city and if you look, there's a lot of cross pollinating, there's a lot of people know each other from a variety of contacts. We've got city people here, we've got county people, neighbors, developers, you know, a guy, you know, this is from St Mark's church is down here with people from the RTA.

So it's, it's people from all over and that's what makes Tucson cool is that, you know, we're a big, small city.

24:14

[unidentified woman]: May I interrupt?

CC: You may, please do.

UW: You don't know me. I'm not in your ward.

24:21

I'm, I have the misfortune of not being in your war. I want to thank you for your vote on 36th and La Cholla. Obviously, it didn't do any good for you. Thank you.

24:34

SK: All right, sometimes you win by losing, right?

24:38

You represent everybody, not just your great constituents. Thank you.

24:44

CC: We'll let you get back to talking to people.

24:48

[unidentified woman #2]: So I just had to thank you. I'm just gonna say good night, take care of yourself, chatted with these guys, thanks and so many other votes just so many other.

25:07

SK: So let me give you a 12 second sound bite.

25:10

CC: Oh You know, we don't care about the 12 second sound bite. We're good. We'll let you get back to . . .

[Kozachik staffer]: People are starting to leave. We need you to stand up on a table and say a few words.

SK: I can't get on a table.

CC: Tucson City Council will begin looking for Kozachik's replacement on Monday. Those interested in filling the last 19 months of his term can apply through the City Clerk's office.

Applicants must have been eligible to vote in the city for three years and have lived in Ward Six for one year. While the city charter does not specify that a replacement has to be of the same party, the city council has said it intends to replace Kozachik with another Democrat.

And that's The Buzz for this week.

Tune in next week as we look at how Arizona's share of opioid lawsuit settlements are being spent.

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Our music is by Enter the Haggis. I'm Christopher Conover. Thanks for listening.

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