

Indivisible Meeting April 10 2023

Speaker, Phil Casaus Editor, Santa Fe New Mexican

Introduction

He's a native New Mexican born in Albuquerque and graduated from UNM. He started at the New Mexican in 2017 . Before that, Phil served as executive director, Albuquerque Public Schools Education Foundation, where programs like Fine Arts, Literacy and STEM programs were emphasized.

He's spent more than a couple of decades at the paper working as a columnist and an assistant sports editor.

From there he went to the Albuquerque Tribune becoming president from March of March of 2008 and during this time with the Tribune, the Tribune won several national awards including first place in the National Journalism Awards for a 20 part series titled the State of Our Children.

He also worked at the Rocky Mountain News in Denver. That makes sense.

So Phill is here this morning to help us understand the process that the paper uses to choose their coverage of bills and legislature. So we're hoping for some insight as to how to improve our system because you guys do an excellent job of it.

So we want to become a mini New Mexican, but from an advocacy perspective.

Phill

- They don't have a system in place on how we determine what they cover.
- They we have a whole year to prepare for a session. They cover the community and the state throughout the year. And from there, you really sort of glean what you might need to cover or what's going to be a big deal.
- They have two reporters and a variety of photographers. They send as many reporters or as few as they need.
- Some things really just present themselves right. If the governor puts abortion legislation or somebody puts out legislation on how the state is going to deal with prescribed burns or abortion or some of those things, these have all been huge issues for days, weeks, months, years, decades going into a session.
- Some of it is a no-brainer. We are rarely surprised.
- As the editor , he probably goes on three basic things to look for when they look at legislation beyond the obvious.
 - Are there things that have popped up in reporting that may not rise to a 350,000, a 100,000 acre forest fire, but have become a bigger and bigger and bigger deal as time goes on?

- Example, crime legislation. Crime legislation didn't just show up in the last two years, three years. This has been a drip, going on for a long time, largely in Albuquerque. Things that become water cooler conversations.
- And they started to make their way into legislation over time. What are issues that people are talking about more and more and more? These are water cooler issues.
- Environmental issues not necessarily new to New Mexico or unique to New Mexico, but you're seeing more of them come to the legislature.
- So they look at water cooler issues, national issues which become much bigger statewide issues like the abortion legislation. Many democrats saw the writing on the wall when Trump was elected. And so two years ago, they began to make that move to that they were going to start codifying or getting rid of the 1969 legislation.
- And then some of it is instinct. It is the instinct of the guys that we have covering the legislature. The two folks that we have are Robert Nott and Daniel Chacon
- Those guys are two of their most experienced reporters. They haven't been at the legislature for eons and decades, but they've been around in New Mexico for a long time.
- And they've covered the legislature between the two of them. And they've been around for six, seven years when you either both.
- And so those two have a great deal of they have great sources, they have great instincts, and they have great experience.
- Reporters look at the pre files before the session even starts.
- And then during the session, they'll just go in and look at things and say, that's interesting. And you know, I mean, the stuff they write about runs the gamut of something that is incredibly important for every one of the 2.1 and a half million people who live in this state, or something is esoteric.
- You can't just give people meat and potatoes and oatmeal every day and say take it and like it. You have to engage them in some way. So they look for bills that might engage or enrage and say here's what's being introduced.
- Do we thye do them all? Heck no. There's too many. Generally they really try to focus on big issues, things that people will talk about, and things that are really important.

Question - to you is what in the past few years have you experienced a bill that sort of came out of nowhere. Or that you didn't pay enough attention to and you wish wish you had. And, and, and what was the outcome of that or the backlash if there is any.

Answer - really good example. There's this nonprofit journalism outfit called New Mexico in depth, Trip Jennings runs it. NM has a big alcohol problem. It's multi-layerd and goes way back. Trip came to The New Mexican last summer and said they were going to go ahead and work on a series about alcohol. And they did a great job.

About advocacy and journalism

- Good journalism makes people and legislators more aware about a lot of issues.
- Good advocates understand that their issues too and they identify their issues early. Good journalism should be is more long game in terms of covering issues. Same with advocacy. And from an advocacy standpoint, that's something that needs to be looked at early rather than in late fall. But really spring during interim committees, that's where the that's where the sausage is made.
- Everybody says the sausage is made in January, February, March. Maybe. But a lot of the stuff, gets done early. Carnage is done early. And when the session is not on session.
- Many legislators would really, really be happy if journalists didn't exist and certainly one or. But the great thing about journalists is they're very good at finding people who will tell them things, finding sources.
- Many advocates and journalist are in the same boat. They probably don't want to see advocacy because like journalist, advocates push for things that are really hard to do.

Question - do journalists ever take the time to go look at the things that never surface, don't ever even get either out of rules or never get a committee hearing even though there's time and do any kind of study issue reporting about why are these things being ignored.

Answer - In some thing on the tax bill, you bet the tax bills. I mean the tax bill, if anything was a hash, it was a tax bill, right?

- Tax bills are hash and sort of a very odd hash. They spent a lot of time trying to figure out what exactly happened there on other bills.
- Atsome point you get into a mathematical issue, particularly later in the session, we got this much which is moving on.

Question: Our experience has been that we did everything you said. And we work for a long time before the election started. And then the last, very, very last minute. So, we did everything we did. They wanted it to go behind closed doors and we should do nothing about it.

Another question I have, how can we influence you to cover something?

Answer -

- Very similar to dealing with legislators. You say, we are this group, we're really interested in these things. We'd like to let you know that this is what we're really pushing.
- Sometimes really amazed when folks tell me, well, you didn't cover this. But he says, "I'm like, well, we didn't know about it."
- It's very easy not to know something, despite your best intentions, because there's a lot of things going on and you've got this much time.
- Let media know about what you've got going on is the first step.

- If people want the paper to know about what their issue is and how they're going about trying to get their issue passed and signed. The paper all for that.
- No guarantee. Just keep letting them know about it. Did you send me something last month? Did you send me something last week? Did you send me something in September?
- If there's something you think the paper should cover, write the two legislative reporters and cc Phill.

Question - About getting answers from the Gov. re vetoes

Answer:

- Often you get platitudes and gibberish, but often you don't get, well, we didn't like it because actually the alcohol lobby is very strong.
- They're never going to say that They're never going to say, well, the alcohol lobby really is very strong here. Or if I sign this bill, I absolutely hammer myself with a big wing on my card.
- Right. They're not, they're not necessarily under any obligation to tell you. And I find that, I find that a dereliction in many ways.
- But generally the more the more controversial the issue, the less clear the message is.