Gary Slade Esplin Interview
Interviewed by Loren Webb

Date of Interview: April 15, 2025

Participants: Loren Webb (Interviewer)
Gary Slade Esplin (Interviewee)

Location of Interview: St. George, Utah

Webb: Hi. My name is Loren Webb. I'm with the Washington County Historical Society, and this is our eighteenth interview since we began the Oral History Series back around 2021. My guest here today is Gary Esplin, who is retired St. George [Utah] City Manager. So let's just start. Gary, tell us, what is your full name?

Esplin: Gary Slade Esplin.

Webb: Okay. And when did you become interested in city government?

Esplin: When I was attending the University of Utah in 1974 and I went to BYU in 1976 to get a master's degree in city government.

Webb: And when did you decide to apply to become the St. George City manager?

Esplin: Well, in 1974 the United States was facing a significant recession, and I had a master's degree from BYU in city government, and very few people were finding jobs. I had one job interview for the Utah Association of Counties and didn't get that job. But I'd done an internship here in St. George the previous year as part of the requirements for the MPA degree, so I came down to St. George and begged my way into an assistant to an assistant job to the previous city manager that was then here serving, Darwin Dennis. And they gave me a job to kind of work through. My intention was that I would work two or three years in St. George as an assistant to get something to put on my resume, then be gone somewhere across the country because the average tenure of a city manager across the country is three to five years in one place. So I figured I'd get that experience and then go on to someplace else.

Webb: So Darwin Dennis—my understanding is he was the very first city manager that St. George City ever had. Is that correct?

Esplin: Officially, his official title was City Coordinator. And they'd had a couple before him, but nobody really [was] officially doing that job like he was.

Webb: Okay. And then he died in office, is that right?

Esplin: Yes. In 1976 I'd been here three or four months. He had a heart attack and passed away in office. And so I stepped in and just started to do the agendas and to do some of the work. And having been here before, and being a lifetime resident of St. George, or, you know, people knew me a little bit, and so they started to ask me questions, and I just started doing the job. And then on December 23, 1976, which happened to be December 23 is my birthday, that's why I remember, they offered, the City Mayor and City Council, offered me a one-year probationary job to see if I could do the job.

Webb: Wow. Okay. And what years did you serve as City Manager?

Esplin: 1976 through 2018.

Webb: '18. Okay. At the time you retired in 2018, were you the longest-serving city manager in U. S. history?

Esplin: No, not—

Webb: Because the *St. George News* said you were, and—

Esplin: Well, I think what they interpreted that to be in one place, 42 years like in one place at that time. There's a lot of people that have served longer in different, you know, positions, in different cities.

Webb: You're probably one of the top five, though.

Esplin: Oh, yeah, I think so.

Webb: So what did you see were your duties as City Manager?

Esplin: To do the day-to-day administrative functions of the City, to make sure the potholes are fixed, there's power on, there's water on, and just those daily duties that people expect you to do as a City, to provide those services. And carry out the, the City Mayor and City Council give you direction of where they want to see the City going, and then you try to do your very best to follow their guidelines to go that direction that they want to take the City.

Webb: Okay. During your tenure as City Manager, what City mayors did you serve with?

Esplin: First mayor was Neal Lundberg. I served with him for like one year. And then after that, Grey Larkin ran against Mr. [Neal] Lundberg and won and served for four years. And then Karl Brooks for twelve years and Dan McArthur for 20 years, and then Jon Pike.

Webb: For how many years?

Esplin: I think Jon was six years, I think one term and then half of another term.

Webb: So how would you describe each mayor's leadership styles? Tell us a little bit about Neal Lundberg.

Esplin: Well, Neal, back then St. George was 8,000 people, and it was very community oriented—Lions Club, Rotary Clubs, civic groups, and Chamber of Commerce, and those folks were the most prominent ones in the community, and he was a leader in that community aspect of it, one of the original builders of the Sun Bowl. And that's one thing that was interesting to me through my tenure was that during that tenure, mayors and city council people ran for office because they wanted to positively affect the city. There weren't issues, there weren't national issues, there weren't state issues, necessarily. There were local issues, and they wanted to serve their community and make it a better [one]. And all of them had that goal.

Webb: Let me go back to Neal Lundberg. As I understand it, during his term is when the St. George City swimming pool was moved down to 700 with the hydro tube—is that right?

Esplin: The hydro tube wasn't built then, but the pool was built then. They got a grant. Just before I came, they got a grant from the Outdoor Recreation Bureau and built the pool.

Webb: And Moore Business Forms moved in at that time. Were they one of the first major businesses to move into St. George?

Esplin: They were. And I think we need to put it in context with what St. George is, and over the years people have said, well, why did you let St. George grow to be big, lose all the Mayberry aspects of the community. Well, I think that the leaders of this community started way back with the J. C. Snows and the Atkin families and those people because they recognized that when you graduated from high school the job opportunities were scarce. When I graduated from Dixie High School in 1970, I had no choice but to leave. I had to leave. There weren't any jobs here for the youth. And so they got Kellwood to move here. They were a sleeping bag [manufacturing] factory. They started Dixie Development Corporation where the community raised money to fund going out and trying to recruit business here. They got Moore Business Forms to build out in Green Valley when there was nothing around it. And so they had a forward looking idea that in order to make sure that St. George was prosperous and didn't die on the vine because few could find jobs here. So they went out and went after businesses. I think that Neal was one of those original guys that had that view, and all the mayors since then have had that same philosophy.

Webb: Okay. Anything that stands out about James Grey Larkin?

Esplin: James Grey was an incredible guy. He sacrificed so much to be the mayor because he had a business on the side, his plumbing business, and he couldn't bid on projects for the city. He was one of the first guys to take the business approach to government because he was running his own business. So he wanted the City to run similar to a business. So I think that was an important contribution. Grey was an incredible man. He served on

the State Road Commission and brought lots of projects to St. George. There were lots of people like that that had that effect on St. George beyond their business. They were doing other things, serving on boards and as directors, and I can think of quite a few of those who did that. And you, Loren, know one of those people that I felt like had an incredible experience and positive effect in St. George, and Jerry Lewis was one of my heroes and a mentor for me, and not only from his ecclesiastical position as my bishop, but also as county commissioner and a businessman. And I could name many others, but as far as the mayors, each mayor brought a different perspective. When Karl Brooks was elected mayor, he was working for Dixie College at that time, and so the ties between Dixie College and the City were closer then. We built the Dixie Center then. He and I went to every community in the County to ask them to vote for being included in the Dixie Center Special Service District. Some of them said no, some of them said yes, and they had a vote, and we got the Dixie Center started on the college campus. And then it outgrew that, and we went on to where the Dixie Center is now. But that relationship between the College and the City has always been there. But it was strengthened with Karl. Karl was kind of laissez faire type of guy. He wanted me to run the business, and he kind of was just there to help when it was necessary.

Webb: And one of the things that Karl always said was, "What do we want to be when we grow up, as a City."

Esplin: Exactly.

Webb: I love that philosophy.

Esplin: That, and he always said, "We stand on the shoulders of giants" because he was really into that history, and was an incredible mayor. And then you know, Dan McArthur—you know, a people person. He was a man of the people, hard working and dedicated and strong history in the community and brought that personable aspect to it.

Webb: Kind of a singing mayor, *If You're From Dixie.*

Esplin: Yes, he was. And you know, Jon Pike brought, a time when the ties between the City and Intermountain Health, you know, and strengthened those ties and building the new campus, and it just happened that he was there and brought those ties together which was significant to the community. So each mayor brought something different. They were all honest to a fault. They never looked out for their own interest, and they did what was right for the community in their eyes.

Webb: Okay. So while serving as City Manager, what do you feel were your major accomplishments to the City?

Esplin: I learned a long time ago, and maybe that's why I served as long as I did, that if anything that goes well, or you do good, you give the mayor and city council the credit for it. And if something goes bad, you take the credit for it. So I, you know, there's lots of things we worked on over the years. I don't know that I was involved with, that I could

take credit for any of them. But, you know, I had a real, growing up in St. George, I had a real affinity for downtown. Because then, in 1970 and earlier, everything was downtown—all the shopping was down town, all the schools were downtown, the churches, the Tabernacle was downtown. So if you wanted to do anything in St. George, you went downtown. And I had a real desire to try to see that the St. George downtown could be, you know, strengthened and not go away. Because at the time, in the early years, everybody was going to the suburbs. And all the communities were losing their downtown, most of the communities were losing their downtowns, and they were suffering because the malls were going out of the area. And so businesses downtown had it tough. And so we put together the Town Square concept. Looking at big, successful communities across the world, they always seemed to have one strong trait, and that was their downtown. It's a place to go and a place to be. We bought the old Dixie College Administration Building, the City did, on the one corner. We worked with the LDS Church to strengthen the Tabernacle on one corner. And we had our partner, the School District, build their office building and preserve the old Woodward Building. And then we did a partnership with the County to build a brand new Library on the last corner. So there we had four corners of our Town Square. And so that, to me, was significant. And I think if you look at it today it shows you that it is successful. There's another huge project they're talking about right now downtown plus the ones that were done with the hotel that was built and all the banks and everything that's happened downtown. It's the place to be. There are apartments, there are people moving back downtown. And so I think that was something that I feel pretty good about.

Webb: It seems like it's very vibrant downtown.

Esplin: It is.

Webb: Especially in the evening.

Esplin: Yes.

Webb: You can go down to Ancestor Square, and there's lots of young people, and it just seems like it's happening.

Esplin: And that's not by accident. The City created a Redevelopment Agency downtown. We bought properties when we could. We sold them to Zion Bank, we sold them to the developer of the Judds, and all that stuff downtown with the apartments and with the Marriott Hotel there. It was a long process. But, you know, Loren, if I could say one thing about my tenure at the city that I felt very strongly about, and maybe we can't do that nowadays. But we operated with a handshake. We had the Dixie Spirit. And I don't use that term, you know, politically or socially or anything else. The Dixie Spirit was that we couldn't get along without supporting each other. The School District—a handshake. The handshake—a handshake. And the University—a handshake. We knew that we had to be successful. We had to use the School District's gyms after hours. We had to build parks around the schools so they could use those. The County and us would get together for the Dixie Center. And we all worked together, and we did

it with trust and a handshake. And we couldn't have done any of this stuff without the RDAs, with the School District giving up some of their tax dollars, looking at the future, you know—the Dixie Center was one of that. And so those things are what are dear to me is that we did it together, the Conservancy District, the water, all those things were done in the spirit of cooperation.

Webb: Right. So what influence did you have in helping the City to increase its number of golf courses from when you started to when you retired?

Esplin: It's interesting because when I came back to St. George I was making less than my wife was making with a Master's degree because of the economy at that time. And I had played a lot of golf in my day, and at the University of Utah I played with all the golfers. I didn't go out for the team, but I played a golf tournament about every weekend, thought myself to be pretty good. And when I came back in '76, the current City Manager at that time offered me the job as the Head Pro at the Dixie Red Hills Golf Course because they had just built what was called Lava Hills golf course then, and so the Pro was leaving and going down there. I thought about that, you know, a golf pro or work for $500 a month as a City Manager, and I thought to myself, "I'm not going to give up all the years that I've studied to do this to be that, not that there's anything wrong with being a golf pro. So I turned it down, and they hired Brent Orchard after that. So I've had a kind of an affection for golf. And in Church I used to draw golf courses and design golf courses. I actually had a chance to do that as a City Manager to design a couple of nines at existing golf courses. So I felt that golf was critical to the economic development. It brought people here in the winter time, not instead of being a pass through going from here to California, or here to somewhere else, we became a destination. And that destination was critical. The first part of that were the golf courses and building golf courses.

Webb: And Dixie Red Hills was the beginning of all.

Esplin: Red Hills, yes.

Webb: So what others were added to the city?

Esplin: Well, at that time, just after Dixie Red Hills, the current Southgate Golf Course was built, and it's been redesigned a couple of times. And then Bloomington Country Club and St. George Golf Club, which was Bloomington Hills before, came into fruition. And Terracor was one of the major players to get St. George on the map. They went all over the country selling St. George and lots and doing their development around those golf courses. And so they were one of the very first, if not the first, to get the word out on golf and St. George being a destination point. And then after Bloomington and Bloomington Hills, I think Green Springs was built. And then we built Sunbrook and then you've got the other ones, all the rest of them.

Webb: And there's like what, 15 golf courses now?

Esplin: I don't know, there's probably like 14 or 15? But I think that that was—

Webb: And how have they benefited the City, the golf courses, both the public and the private golf courses benefited the City and City residents.

Esplin: Well, the problem that St. George has always faced, and any smaller community faces, is State law. State law is very strict on what revenue sources, how you can raise the money to operate your city, and they limit the sales tax to like a local option sales tax to what sales are generated in your community, and originally that was a hundred percent of that, and everything that was generated in your community, you got your sales tax back to the City where that business event occurred. And then they changed that to a 50-50 point of sale. But that sales tax that was generated was significantly higher than the property taxes. And those are the only two revenue sources you really had. So we used those sales taxes that we generated from the golf courses, from conventions, from all those other activities that we were out promoting in the St. George area to help keep our property taxes low.

Webb: Okay. Describe the recreation, arts, and parks tax, and how did that come about and how has that benefited City residents?

Esplin: Well, it's part of the overall economic development plan that we came up with to maximize what we had to offer here. I'll never forget after the Quail Creek Dike broke.

Webb: 1989.

Esplin: Yeah.

Webb: January 1.

Esplin: Exactly. And I was down at a New Year's Eve party in Bloomington when the Chief called me and said, "The dam broke." And I thought he was being funny. But he wasn't. And so it went on crazy. But after it all settled down and we tried to figure out what we were going to do, Kent Perkins came to me, he was my Leisure Services director, and said to me, "I want to build a trail on top of the easement that we're going to put in for the sewer line." And I said, "You're crazy. Who wants to walk down a trail? You can go walking on the street, Kent. What do you need trails for?" But as part of that critical area's plan that was developed, we went in and bought all the lowlands along the rivers we could. We bought all the mountain acreages that had hillside issues. We bought all those things and tried to accumulate them and preserve them. And we started to build the trails. And that bond that was passed by the public, which I think is really important because people said they were willing to put up some property tax money to build those. And then we built the softball complex out in Dixie Downs area where it was recognized as the top one in the country. And we built the swimming pool out there, and we built parks and soccer fields, and we did all that stuff

knowing that was going to generate traffic and generate people to come here. So it was a plan.

Webb: Which it has done.

Esplin: So it has done. And it's just renewed, which gives me confidence that people liked what was happening. We had the right direction there because they have proved it again and taxes themselves to redo some parks and build some new stuff.

Webb: Okay. So in the late 1980s, early 1990s, developer Buck Flowers' Shadow Hills Townhomes project on the Black Hill resulted in major scarring of the Black Hill near the D. So what avenues did the City Council attempt to alleviate the scarring, and were they successful, and can you explain about that?

Esplin: Well, unfortunately, at that time the City didn't have a hillside development law, a requirement, that would preclude them, private property, from being developed. That was a three to two vote to allow, you know, after the scar had already been done, to try to fix it and to do that development. But what it spawned was the Critical Areas Plan. And it spawned a recognition that we needed to do a better job in preserving our hillsides, and not destroy some of those features.

Webb: Right. So you had the City Hillside Review Committee and the Critical Area Plan Committee, but before we get to that, I just still wanted to find out what avenues did the City actually take to restore, the scarring up there? Because that's—

Esplin: Well, it's on private property, and so there was a development approved that never got built that was going to build some units where that scar was. The City even, until the time I left, had budgeted a couple, $200,000 a year in their capital plan, to fix that scar. And eventually it will be fixed. But unfortunately, the way it was cut, it's very difficult to fix it and not create another, you know, site, because it's so vertical. But some way, sometime, somehow, it will be fixed. But it did spawn a discussion about the importance of preserving what God gave us on in hillsides and our lands and that. So it was, from one side, very successful in getting us to look at that.

Webb: Okay. And do the City Hillside Review Committee and the Critical Area Plan Committee, how successful have those committees been in keeping our hillsides environmentally safe from rock falls and scarring by developers?

Esplin: Well, I think the success is based on—do you see another one that's been scarred? And then look at the ownership. Who owns Webb Hill? I'm not sure if related to you, Loren, but the Webb Hill out in Bloomington Hills.

Webb: It is. I am related to Webb Hill.

Esplin: The City made a trade. We traded the old dump up on the Red Hill to the BLM, and the BLM traded to Terracor the property on Webb Hill, and they got property out by the

new airport. So it was a three-way trade, and we gave up an asset in order to secure the ownership of that. And we purchased all the hillside that we could buy from the Atkin family around the Black Hill. And we have lots of property on the East Black Ridge. And so it spurred an idea that where we had available money and it became available, the properties, that we would purchase them, so that we could control what happened to them. And even more importantly was the river ways. With the floods and everything that happened in 2005 and other times, the City purchased the properties along that river. So I think the City is a major landowner all the way from the east City boundaries down below Bloomington, and they control all that property.

Webb: Can you discuss the impact of the St. George Regional Water Treatment facility completed in 1989 and the St. George Regional Reclamation Waste Water Facility that was completed in March 1990?

Esplin: Well, obviously St. George is dependent on water. And it's been a fight forever, even when I was young they used to ration water here. And the sources of water were so limited that they've had to go out, we've had to go out and find the water. And we handled it ourselves with wells up in Gunlock and the City itself. But recognize at that point, at some point we couldn't do it ourselves; we need to do it regionally. We needed to get all the communities together again and to do it on a County-wide basis because the economies of scale and having someone like Ron Thompson [Washington County Water Conservancy District Manager], and I don't know if Ron gets the credit that he's due, because without Ron Thompson St. George wouldn't be here.

Webb: So that's one of the reasons why the St. George Water Treatment—

Esplin: We built the Water Treatment Plant.

Webb: You built it, and then the County eventually took it over?

Esplin: And then we gave it to the County, and they expanded it. And then they added to that Santa Clara, Ivins, and Washington as part of that to utilize those what scarce water resources we have.

Webb: Tell us a little about, as I recall, when I became a reporter for *The Spectrum*, the St. George Waste Treatment Facility was where, was on the south side of the freeway.

Esplin: The Dixie Center.

Webb: North of the Dixie Center.

Esplin: Yes, right there.

Webb: Yeah, and now it's down closer to Sun River on the north side of the river. Tell us a little about what that's done for the City and what are some of the plans? I understand there are some really neat plans ahead for the Waste Water Treatment facility.

Esplin: Well, at that time, the City was still growing, and we had to built a new plant because our plant wasn't up to the standards, EPA standard. So we decided to go to the very lowest point in the City, and then we contracted with Washington and with Santa Clara and with Ivins to treat their sewage. Even though the City of St. George still owns the plant, we have contracts to treat the sewage. And we built it down there so that all the water would naturally flow to its lowest point.

Webb: Which is down just south of Bloomington?

Esplin: Right. And so that's where the plant was built. Interesting, a few years later, after the plant was built, there was a lawsuit filed against the City and the County over water rights by the Native Americans claiming water rights. And we ended up, Ron and I, going back to Washington, D.C., and we negotiated a deal with them with the Department of Justice and all the entities, and we got a grant. I think if I remember right it was fourteen or sixteen million dollars to further clean up the water down there and make it usable, re-use, and we had enough money to build, because of part of that settlement, we had to take 2,000 acre feet of water back up to the Shivwits Indian Reservation. So we built a pipeline all the way from that treatment plant up to Ivins with their money. And we cleaned the water up, and then we traded water rights with some of the farmers along the way. And then we started to expand that re-use water out, because that re-use water is as clean as the water you are drinking right now.

Webb: And now we're looking eventually, tell us about the eventual.

Esplin: Eventually they're going to be drinking that water.

Webb: Yah.

Esplin: They're going to store it, and they're going to utilize it because you're putting, I don't know how many millions of gallons, twenty millions of gallons a day, and you have to put some in the river for the endangered species, but the rest of that can be used, and it will be the major source of water in this community down the road.

Webb: And that's significant. Okay. In 1994, the Citizens For Moderate Growth petitioned the City Council to set a 3 percent growth limit and gradually reduce building permits from 1100 that year to about 300 annually. The CMG argued the unique lifestyle enjoyed by the City at that time would be destroyed if the City continued to grow rapidly. The Council at that time took no action. The CMB proponents succeeded in getting the initiative on the 1995 election ballot. But the initiative was defeated by 63 percent of the voters. So in your opinion, do you agree or disagree that the defeat of that initiative by the building industry led to an uncontrolled housing boom, including five-story high-density housing, increased dust pollution from ongoing developments, traffic jams, and increased crime.

Esplin: Oh, I totally disagree with that. I mean that premise, that is, if that would have been passed, then what you would have had would have been an elitist community here that no one could afford to live. If you had to reduce the number of available units down from that amount to 300, then all that would have done is increase the cost to the point that nobody could afford to live here, nobody could mow the lawns, where would the firemen go, the policemen, nothing. You can't artificially control that. And it's been tried throughout the country and never successfully. Now controlling growth through good planning and you know, where's that right number, is still debatable. And I think that that gave, brought up a lot of issues. To me, the most critical issues that the City is facing today are the same ones we faced all the time. And that is affordable housing and water. You can build all the sewer treatment plants you want. You can bring in power, you know, if you build more power lines. You can't manufacture water to a certain point. You've got to, the water is that factor. And the bigger concern to me, because maybe we can find that water somehow, Lake Powell, whatever it ends up being, is that St. George has been discovered to the point that thirty or forty percent of the homes are second homes here. And what that's done is driven the cost of a single-family home up, and the cost of the property has gone up because of people wanting to move here. So what it's done is create a problem of affordability for housing.

Webb: So how is St. George City, how did you deal with that affordability issue, and how do you think the City should be dealing with that now and in the future?

Esplin: You made the comment earlier about maybe a negative effect, a possible negative effect of five stories, or whatever. That decision has been made in St. George, and it's not Mayberry, as we talked about before. And the only way to my mind is people's going to have to change their attitude as far as size of lots, of density of height. It's going to change that. Otherwise it's going to force people to live in Beryl Junction and drive here to work. And because the price of land here is so expensive that it makes it difficult for the young people to find a place to live. And that concerns me for my grandkids; it concerns me for the people graduating from Utah Tech, and those people who want to stay here. We do not want to be a 65-plus-year-old community. We've got to have a balance between the young, middle aged, and the old. And that is a challenge. And I don't have the answer to it, other than it's going to have to take a different mindset with regard to "not in my back yard" mentality of people.

Webb: Right. And I know Springdale is facing, looking at that same issue. How do they get these young people to work and doing all the motel work and the restaurant work up in Springdale.

Esplin: I can tell you the answer is the land. And if you look at the land cost in St. George is driven by the small amount of private land. When you have the 75+ percent, I don't even know what that number is, but it's large, of land owned by the State of Utah, the National Parks, and the Federal Government. Until you can free that land up a little bit and allow houses to be built on some of those lands, still protecting the natural beauties of what we enjoy here. We don't want to destroy that. But there are lands that could be

developed that aren't part of that that maybe could drive the land cost down. That's my perspective, for what it's worth.

Webb: Okay. So what kind of impact do you think, positive or otherwise, have developers Alan Coombs, Dean Terry, Kay Traveller, Jay Ence, Darcy Stewart, the Sullivan brothers, S & S Homes, Ed Burgess of Quality Excavating, Milo McCowan, Gary Brown, Jeff Morby, and Paul Jensen Sr. and Paul Jensen Jr. had on the City? So in other words, are there any standouts in their contributions to the city among this group of developers? I know you've had a chance to work with so many of them and probably even more that I haven't even named. But what are some of these standouts that you'd like to maybe just comment about.

Esplin: Well, I think if you look at it from a historical perspective of St. George, I've mentioned a few already. But I look at it like a staircase. When I started in '76, 10,000 people here. There wasn't any of that. But the first step was Alan Coombs, in my opinion. Excuse me, the first step was Terracor.

Webb: With Bloomington and Bloomington Hills.

Esplin: Bloomington and Bloomington Hills. And they were advertising and selling lots all over the country. So that got St. George known. They did a huge development, lots of lots out there. And they did the golf course. And so they were the first, in my opinion, the first real developer with an impact.

Webb: And of course Jeff Morby was there.

Esplin: Yes. And the second step up was Alan Coombs.

Webb: With Green Valley.

Esplin: Well, he started with the Convention Center. He built the Four Seasons Convention Center, and he did some of that, which brought conventions here, and brought a larger hotel, and had a center where you could bring people in. And then he went to Green Valley and did a Green Valley development. And those are the two major ones that really advertised and threw their stuff out. The rest of the developers were good developers. They did quality projects. But they were just builders. And they didn't really have the same level, even though they built major projects now. The Ed Burgesses and the Darcy Stewarts and those that are doing huge projects.

Webb: Yeah, Darcy Stewart with Sun River.

Esplin: Right.

Webb: In the aftermath of the three female St. George Police Department employees who filed sexual harassment complaints against Police Chief Joe Hutchings, what did you as City Manager and the City Council do to restore public confidence in the Police Department?

Esplin: Well, I'm not here to condemn Joe Hutchings, the Police Chief at that time. I think he made some mistakes, and I think like we all make mistakes, and I think he lost his job over that, and the City kind of went a little bit of a different direction after that and brought in Jon Pollei from Salt Lake City. He had the experience in Salt Lake City and maybe brought it to the next level. And I think that next level of expertise and that is evident in all the departments. You get a new Public Works Director, or you get a new Leisure Services Director who brings experiences from other areas, and we built a pretty good management team. This didn't spur that, but it was a growth that came out of the City growing and requiring additional expertise.

Webb: Okay. During the early to mid-1990s, crowds of teenage spring break crowds disrupted evenings on St. George Boulevard, including there was one year there was an actual riot.

Esplin: Oh, just a small one, a disagreement, Loren.

Webb: Okay. What lessons were learned by City officials on how to keep the peace? I'm sure you remember that; I do.

Esplin: Well, I remember telling my kids that I'd discipline them if I saw them on the Boulevard, but they were there. I think that was a just a sign of the times, it was a reckoning. But I think you see that happening throughout Utah, even after us. But it spurred us to go to the school districts and work with them on when they had spring break so they didn't schedule them all at the same time.

Webb: Right.

Esplin: So they staggered them.

Webb: Spring breaks are staggered.

Esplin: We welcome those kids that came down. But you know, they all came down with five dollars in their pocket and went home with six dollars. So, you know, it wasn't a real good thing for the economy.

Webb: And a lot, all they did was stand. They did a lot of standing.

Esplin: You look back and laugh on that. Fortunately, nothing really bad happened. But it just shows you that St. George had been discovered. And then you go to the one up by Nephi where to go with their four-wheelers and do all that stuff, and Moab. And people were discovering places to go and things to do. And that was kind of an evolution for us. And fortunately, nothing bad happened.

Webb: Right, right. Why was the St. George Regional Airport built, of course, replacing the one on the Black Hill, and what kind of economic impact and otherwise has it had on the community since it's been operating out there?

Esplin: Let me just say I'm not trying to brag or anything, but that was probably the most complicated project ever taken under in the City of St. George or Washington County, maybe even the State. And it was an incredible feat to pull it off. Obviously, the reason it had to happen was it's like that stage we talked about, the stairs going up. We had reached a point where we needed to go to the next stair.

Webb: You needed more runway.

Esplin: Right.

Webb: You ran out of, what was it, 6500 feet on the Black Hill?

Esplin: We ran out of runway, and SkyWest, which has been great for the community, and stayed here with their roots being here, Terry came to us and said, "Hey, we've got to move up to a larger aircraft, and we can't land it up there on the battleship, the Black Hill battleship, so you've got to do something." So we had to find a place to go to build that new airport. And you know, with all the Federal land around and mountains that are here and whatever, we went through all that looking at sites and doing all that type of stuff, and really only found one site that could possibly make it happen and still be in Washington County and the City of St. George. And that site was selected. And you know, it's interesting because that site had no access, had no power, had no sewer, had no water to it.

Webb: Right. It was the old Civil Aviation Administration?

Esplin: CAA Airport, also known as the drag strip.

Webb: Yeah, the drag strip.

Esplin: And it had no services out there. So we had to put together a road. We worked with our partners in the State, and it's a story that is just unbelievable that everything fell into place. It had to be divine intervention because we got a grant to get off the freeway, and we got the State to build that new road out there—when people thought, why are you building a road out to the Southern Parkway, nobody's ever going to use that road—and get the water and the power and the sewer. I mean how it came about and got the Federal grants, and it's interesting because right in the middle of that, the economy went south. We had actually sold the old airport to a developer out of Salt Lake for $40 million, and we were going to use that money to develop the airport. And right in the middle of that, the economy went south and he pulled out. And so we were $20 million short—had no way of raising that money. And I suggested to the City Council that we had money that we'd been saving up for years and years to build that new sewer plant through the expansion of the sewer plant down there. And we had $20 million in that account. And I asked the City Council, I said, "Why don't we borrow the money from ourselves and pay ourselves back, the Sewer Department, and then we'll own the Black

Hill. And we'll keep ownership of the Black Hill, and we will be able to do with it what we want to do later on. And so that's how we did it.

Webb: Okay. So tell us just a little bit about what are the plans for the Black Hill now?

Esplin: Well, then the City, just before I left, sold that, had an open bid, Tech Ridge, and all their owners and whatever bought it from the City, and they agreed in their purchase to put housing, to put tech buildings to go to another element of the economy that obviously is up and going which is the tech industry, and have a campus. And we sold the property to the Dixie Tech up there. And so they ended up with their property, and we sold the rest of it, and they're going to build a big park, and they're going to do a bunch of other stuff as part of that thing. And in actuality, if it all occurs the way it's planned to do is that the money that we sold the property for will pay for the airport, the amount the City put up to pay for the airport.

Webb: Okay. So what other civic or religious organizations have you participated in, if any?

Esplin: Well, I never really got involved in the civic organizations because I thought it would be a conflict for me to be a member of the Rotary club or whatever, and I thought that I'd best keep an arm's length, distance. My dad was a Lion forever, and you know, and those groups, and I supported them and think they've done well. I haven't been involved in much other. I've done other things outside the City and State like insurance board I was on and the League of Cities and Towns I was the President of the City Managers Association there, and I did that type of stuff.

Webb: How long did you serve in that capacity?

Esplin: It was just a year, but you know, you're on the Board, you're an assistant first, and then you, it's about a five-year deal. And then I was with the local Government Trust on their Board for a number of years. I was on the Dixie Center Control Board from the inception of that Board. I was on the Hospital Board. You know, I served in those kinds of capacities. And then I was, had some callings in the religious, my religious side of me.

Webb: Okay. Where and when were you born?

Esplin: Let me, before, could I add one thing?

Webb: Sure.

Esplin: When we were talking about the stairs up the hill, you know, and I didn't see a question on this.

Webb: The 333 steps?

Esplin: Yes, there you go.

Webb: I love that.

Esplin: The devil's steps.

Webb: Everyone loved that.

Esplin: 666 steps, which is the sign of the devil, Loren.

Webb: Yeah, okay. The dragon's tail. Everyone loves that place.

Esplin: But down that stairway up to what St. George started and to where they're at, there was a significant stair that happened, and that's the medical, Dixie Medical Center and the Intermountain Health Center. That was probably one of the most critical things that happened in this community.

Webb: Yeah, it was. So where and when were you born?

Esplin: Are you asking me how old I am?

Webb: Yeah, I guess I am.

Esplin: I was born in 1951.

Webb: 1951. Okay.

Esplin: In St. George, Utah.

Webb: Okay. And who else was in your family?

Esplin: I had three brothers and a sister.

Webb: Okay.

Esplin: My dad was, played basketball for Brigham Young University. How's that?

Webb: Oh, my gosh.

Esplin: And I went to Dixie High School, Dixie Jr. College, played baseball at Dixie for two years, received an honors at entrance scholarship to the University of Utah, went there for two years, graduated with a degree in political science, and then went to Brigham Young University for two year master's degree in public administration.

Webb: Okay. What did your community look like outside of your family?

Esplin: You mean when I first started?

Webb: Yeah, when you got there, what, I mean when you were growing up, the question means what did the town look like when you were growing up?

Esplin: Gravel streets, water running down the ditches.

Webb: Did you grow up in Sandtown?

Esplin: I grew up in Sandtown on Diagonal, 145 West 300 North, the corner of Diagonal Street.

Webb: Oh, my gosh. Okay.

Esplin: I used to stand out in front of my house with a plastic bat or a wooden broom handle and hit rocks at David Watson's house up on top of the hill because he was up on the top and I was down at the bottom. And we were, my dad was a cattleman and a rancher, and I was poor. But I didn't know it. I had everything that I needed and didn't know I was lower scale on the moderate income scale.

Webb: I think a lot of us felt that way. We were happy with what we had.

Esplin: We were happy, went to high school where it was great years, ride your bike down to the middle school and play basketball on the asphalt outside. There were no inside gyms, really. And had a great, you know, went to Dixie Drug and had the suicide squeeze where you got everything in your drink. It was idyllic. You know, went to the movies, a couple of movies. And that was one thing I vowed when I came back if I had the chance to save the old movie theater. And we bought the old Electric Theater and we redid it and created that down town to bring back those memories of what it was like in those idyllic days.

Webb: I kind of miss the Dixie Theater.

Esplin: Yep.

Webb: So where did your ancestors come from?

Esplin: Scotland. And they were, my—

Webb: Where did they first settle?

Esplin: They settled in Nephi and then went to the Big Muddy, down below Mesquite, and they—

Webb: That was one of the toughest missions out there.

Esplin: And they went from there to Orderville, Utah. So all the Esplins originate and come from Orderville, Utah.

Webb: Okay. Well, describe your grammar school and high school years. In other words, your elementary and junior high school years and high school, anything that stands out there.

Esplin: I remember where I was at when John F. Kennedy was killed—walking from fifth grade to sixth grade, on the street.

Webb: I do, too.

Esplin: And I remember that. I remember how close we were together as, you know, there were only, I think, in my graduating class, less than 200 kids. And everything was related to sports and your church. And it was just a lot of fun growing up there and had a lot of good teachers and it was just a fun time, just a fun time.

Webb: Tell us about your interests in your school days. Did you have any particular interests?

Esplin: Playing basketball, playing baseball, Little League to high school to college. And you know, we won the State championship in 1970, and I was on the team, the captain of the basketball team.

Webb: And the Little League ball field was where?

Esplin: The Little League ball field was there by the Sun Bowl.

Webb: That's right.

Esplin: And you know, I think it's interesting the City is going to use some of the funds they got from the new bond to redo the Sun Bowl.

Webb: That would be great.

Esplin: And to, but there again, we sold that property to the School District where the Little League field was in order to build an elementary school because we wanted an elementary school downtown and to encourage people to come downtown and live in downtown. And so we worked out a deal with them on that.

Webb: So how about, any influential teachers that stand out that you had in elementary, middle school, or junior high or high school?

Esplin: I didn't go very often, Loren. I tried to avoid it. I remember Heber Jones. He was a history teacher. I loved Heber. And you know, I wasn't very good in math, but I remember the Everetts and doing math.

Webb: Did you ever have Grant Hafen?

Esplin: I had Grant Hafen, yep, I liked Grant. He taught math. But you know, I was more a menace to the teachers than I was—probably they didn't like seeing me come around. I was kind of cocky, you know.

Webb: Any hobbies or interests when you were growing up that stand out?

Esplin: It was interesting that I started collecting coins when I was younger. And I used to mow lawns in the old Sandtown area. And I was mowing the lawn, and my aunt, my dad's aunt, Grace Esplin, and she's a Snow. But and so I was mowing her lawn, and she knew that I was a coin collector. And so she said, "Come on in after you get the lawn mowed." And I went in there, and she had a 5-gallon bucket of Indianhead pennies that she'd collected from the market they ran up in Cedar City. And so she let me go through that collection and take out every year you could find. And I had the little blue books where you did the coins and did all that. And my mom and I would go to the bank and buy the rolls of coins and stuff and put them in our books. I still have them all. So that's fun. So I did that and chased the girls, and I worked at the Roadside Market when I was old enough to get a job there.

Webb: And Roadside Market was on 100 North (St. George Boulevard) about 400 West? Is that right?

Esplin: Where that turn used to go around the old 91 [Highway 91].

Webb: Yes. So education-wise, did you attend college or university? What was your major or minor?

Esplin: At Dixie I was going to be a business major, Dixie College. I got a baseball scholarship there to play for two years for Coach [Bob] Horlacher, so I did that. But I took a lot of accounting classes and budgeting classes and was going to be a business major. And then I went to the University of Utah.

Webb: And what was your major there?

Esplin: It was going to be business, but I found out that I didn't attend to all my classes like I should have at Dixie, and it would have taken me an extra year to graduate in business, so then I decided to go into political science and go to law school. And that way I could graduate within four years. And I was married at the time, and so finding a job, I worked at Milne Truck Line, the old Milne Truck Line. In Salt Lake I worked the graveyard shift there.

Webb: What did you do?

Esplin: Unloaded trucks. Loaded and unloaded trucks. And then I played golf after my wife was going to school, so I had afternoons free, so I'd go out and bet the truck drivers on the golf course and supplement my income playing golf. But I was going to go to law

school, but I took a few classes in law there at the University of Utah and didn't like it at all.

Webb: So then you switched to BYU?

Esplin: Well, one day, it was kind of an opportune moment for me. I was in the Student Union Building at the university of Utah getting a Coke, and I think it was raining outside, so I couldn't play golf. And so I was walking down the hall, and I saw a sign that said, "Institute of Government Service at BYU, Masters Degrees." And so I just sauntered in there to see what it was 'cause I was in public administration/political science at the U and didn't have an idea what I was going to do, didn't know what jobs were out there, what I could do. And I bumped into the guy that was there. He was the director of the school, the master's program. His name was Karl Snow. And Karl Snow was a senator, a state senator from Utah County. But he had ancestors and his relatives that had settled in Pine Valley. So we had an instant connection, me being from southern Utah and him having relatives there. So he asked me to apply, and so I applied, and I also applied to law school at the same time. And he came back and offered me a scholarship, a two-year scholarship to get my masters degree. And so being a poor student, not knowing how I was going to pay for that degree, I took it and found out later, my resume was good enough I would have got accepted to law school. But fortunately for me, I took that scholarship and spent two years at BYU and got a masters in public administration and city management.

Webb: And what year did you—

Esplin: 1976. It's kind of ironic, in 1976, the economy was in the toilet bowl and it was like a hundred graduates of our program, and nobody could find a job. And I had, with a master's degree I had one job interview. And that job interview was working for the Utah Association of Counties. And fortunately for me, I didn't get the job. And they interviewed two people, and the other guy got the job because he'd done an internship there. And so I came back to St. George and begged my way into a job here.

Webb: So let me go back to your university days. Did you have any influential mentors that stand out, other than Karl Snow? Any that really helped influence and were a positive influence on you?

Esplin: There was a gentlemen named Stewart Grow who had been a city manager throughout the country, and he'd come back to teach at BYU. And he was the instructor in the city management program. There was a gentleman named Timmons, Doctor Timmons, who did personnel management classes who was very good. And I took, I can't remember the teacher's name, but it was a budgeting class. And when you're working in any job, really, but especially in city government you've got to deal with personnel, probably the most difficult part of it. But personnel, the most important thing I think you have to have is a grasp of numbers and money and where is it coming from and where is it going. So budgeting was critical to me. And fortunately, I got a good education at BYU on that. And plus my other classes. I remember Doctor [Robert] Perry who was a

teacher here at Dixie College, taught accounting. And so I got a little bit of accounting background. And I think that really helped me understand the numbers, you know, when you're doing those budgets and stuff. Because there's never enough money to go around, so you've got to prioritize.

Webb: Yeah. So describe how you met and married your spouse.

Esplin: A blind date. I was attending Dixie College, and she was a year younger, and she was attending Hurricane High School. And remember those days when Dixie and Hurricane and Cedar, those were the primary athletic teams in events. And so she had noticed me a little bit, I guess, when we played them. And Don Lay, who was the coach at Dixie High School, basketball and baseball, and his daughter Merry Dawn was good friends with my wife. And so they set me up on a blind date.

Webb: Where was the date?

Esplin: I just went over to Hurricane and we just drove around, dragged Main. You know how that's all you could do in those days was get in your car. And I had a brand new red '68 Camaro that, you know, I was the big man on campus. And so we drove around. And then she asked me to a date over there, which was quite intimidating because you know, the rivalry between Hurricane and St. George was not as bad as Cedar, but still, you're over there with all those guys you played ball against, and it's intimidating. But I went. And then the rest is history.

Webb: Wow, that's so cool. So describe any important aspects of your family life and raising your children. I assume you have children and grandchildren.

Esplin: I have four daughters and one son and 21 grandchildren. And so, you know, going to soccer games and watching them play ball and do all that stuff has been a highlight. But that's one of the things that kept me in St. George. As I mentioned earlier, the average tenure of a city manager across the country is normally three to five years because politically you get a new mayor, you get a new city council, and they go in a different direction, and the first one that's fired is the city manager. And I was lucky enough to grow with St. George because normally guys would come and get in a small city of 10,000, and then they'd go to a 20,000 city, and they'd get a raise, and then they'd go to a 75,000 city, and then they'd go to a 200,000 population city. I got to experience that in one place, in the same house. You know, you go from 10,000 to 30,000 to 70,000, and the challenges of providing for that growth and providing the sewer and the water and the power and dealing with exponential growth, being the fastest growing city in the country, you know, percentage-wise, and the challenge of doing all that and still trying to protect what we have here—the beautiful natural resources and the beauty of the area, the challenges there. And I think that kept me here. Plus it gave me a chance to raise my kids here, to be in a smaller school, to be able to coach Little League teams and coach the girls basketball team or the girls softball team and to be able to be involved in my children's school and in their lives by being here in a smaller community and in a place that you love. And you try to do the very best you can because you want them to

have a good experience. So I had a little extra incentive to try to make St. George the best it could be because I love St. George and I was raised here, and it's my place.

Webb: Right. As you look back over your life, what would you like to be remembered for?

Esplin: Well, that's a tough question. I'd like, I guess, to be remembered that I made a difference, that I was honest, that I tried my very best to do what was right for the community and the people that lived here. You know, you obviously make mistakes, obviously would like to have do-overs and make changes in some policies that maybe didn't go like they were supposed to go. But being able to say that you left the place, after 40 years of working there, better than what it was when you started. I think that was important. And you did it in a way that was beyond reproach. Yeah, you make decisions that people don't agree with. But if you make that decision in the open and you make it so they understand where you're coming and why you made the decision. I think that creating an opportunity for people that want to be here, either whether they want to move here or they want to go to school here and then stay here, creating those opportunities for people to be successful in business. I saw yesterday that St. George was just, they said it was the best place in the country to start a business. That is an attitude. That is a cooperative effort between the university and the schools and the communities to create a place for those things to happen, to be able to affect people's lives in a positive manner. I think it's been something that was important to me.

Webb: Okay. Is there anything else that you feel is important that I have not asked you that you—certainly feel free to tell us about that.

Esplin: I think we've talked about this, but I think it was really important to me to watch the leaders of the community, to watch those influential people. And it used to make me really mad when people would say "those good old boys," you know, the good old boys are doing this, or the good old boys are doing that. I took offense to that because the good old boys made St. George what it is and what it was and what it will be. And they profit, some of them profit by taking risks on building. And yes, that's what you do. People, did they take advantage of situations? I don't believe so. I really truly don't believe that there was any inside information or anybody used anything to take advantage. They took risks and they were rewarded or they were not. Some lost money, some made money. But the environment that allowed that growth and development to happen, the handshakes, the trust levels between the entities, the mayor and city council running to make St. George better, even though you may not agree with one of their positions. I remember Cheer Owens ran on a growth-related issue. And other people ran on issues. But their heart was there, and they wanted to make it better, even though there may have been a difference of opinion on whether that was the right way or the wrong way to do it. And they ran and they were in office and they voted when sometimes they didn't want to vote that way. But it was better for the community and the group and the majority of the group, and they supported each other once that decision was made. And that trust was there. And I only can hope that in the future we don't get to the point where we forget what St. George City is supposed to do. We're not going to solve all the political problems that the country faces. We're going to,

hopefully, bring the sewer and the water and the power and the streets and make this place somewhere that people want to be and they want to raise their families and they want to retire to. And I think that is a challenge that will be ongoing for the foreseeable future because the challenges aren't going to get any less. They're only going to get greater now.

Webb: Right. And I think we would agree that St. George is a very unique place in the world. It really is. And growing up here we knew that it was a special place.

Esplin: Exactly. And there was always going to be disagreements and people questioning whether you made the right decision or not made the right decision. But in my opinion, you can either grow a little at whatever that rate is, or you can decay. And if you're not necessarily growing and changing and adapting, you rot. And so the challenge is to get that balance not to ruin what we were given. You know, people say, the transportation, you know, I had to wait in line, and 700 South's got a lot of traffic there. And they did a poor job, you're growing too fast because there's traffic jams. Well, look at that. God created that problem for us, Loren.

Webb: With all the hills.

Esplin: He put the east Black Ridge over here, and he put a west Black Ridge over here, and he put a Red Hill up here, and he put a Virgin River here and the Webb Hill there. And then what'd he do? He put in the Virgin River he put the Virgin River spinedace, endangered species. So it takes you 10 or 12 years to build a bridge across the Virgin River like the one we built over on Mall Drive. Then he put endangered tortoise up on top of the Red Hill up there.

Webb: Which prevents any development.

Esplin: Prevents any development and the challenge of going around. So how do you get around St. George? You can only go around the hills and then I-15 was built in 1965 to '68 or '70 and cut the City right in half. When I came, there was no way to get on either side of the freeway. It was a directional interchange because the people were afraid that the people were going to build other stuff around and the downtown was going to die because business would move out to new area by freeway

Webb: There were few exits, or underpasses.

Esplin; There were two. And so we had to rebuild the interchanges. We've tried to build, planned to build a loop. You asked a question in there about the traffic master plan, and we did that, and we tried to build a loop around the entire City. And it's coming to fruition. You've got the Southern Corridor. And if you can build the belt loop up across the top, you know. I'm glad there's not going to be a bunch of development up on the Red Hill. I spent my entire childhood up on the Red Hill, and I used to go out there and get the tortoises and drill a hole in their shell and tie them to my clothesline outside, and then release them up on the Red Hill. But thank goodness that maybe that won't be

developed. But that road across there is not going to affect it, and they should build that road. That's my opinion. But that would loop us around.

Webb: You're talking about the Northern Corridor?

Esplin: Yes. That would tie us around. And eventually there'll be one built from Sun River tying in to Santa Clara. And you've got the one now going to Hurricane so you can get on those belt routes and then come in internally. And then as development occurs you'll have commercial development going in those pods so people won't have to drive all the way into town. But in the meantime, you got what you got.

Webb: And you know what, Mayor Jon Pike had this vision of the smaller little business sections that he wanted to see out there that I saw up in Holladay, Utah, and I loved that. And I thought, I'm hopeful that will happen here.

Esplin: Well, you're seeing it now out in Sun River and on the corner of River Road there's some commercial there. And out by the airport there is some commercial. So as those commercial centers are built, then people won't have to drive in to the middle of town for every single thing that's going on.

Webb: Right. Well, we really want to thank Gary Esplin for being here today, for this interview. We want to thank the Community Education Channel Studios for providing this wonderful studio here for the interview. And we appreciate you, the viewer, here to listen in on this interview, and we hope to see you again the next time we do this. Thank you so much for joining us here today.