

Corona in den USA –Der Podcast des Heidelberg Center for American Studies

28 January 2021

“Heidelberg and Palo Alto in the Pandemic: Global Challenges, Local Solutions“

Oberbürgermeister Eckart Würzner, Heidelberg

Mayor Tom DuBois, Palo Alto, California

Anja Schüler: Hello and welcome to this week’s edition of the podcast of the Heidelberg Center for American Studies at Heidelberg University, my name is Anja Schüler. For the past eight months, we have been following the ramifications of the global Covid-19 pandemic. Today, we will look at how cities on both sides of the Atlantic have faced and continue to face the enormous challenges this crisis brings. Our focus will be on Heidelberg and Palo Alto, California, better known as the not-so-secret capital of Silicon Valley. The two cities joined the Smart City Alliance in 2013 and established a more formal partnership in 2017. They’re both homes to renowned universities and research institutions and are committed to developing innovative solutions for problems both cities face like an enormous traffic density and affordable housing. Over the past year, the pandemic has certainly added a new dimension to city politics, and I am delighted that the mayors of Palo Alto and Heidelberg are my guests on the podcast today. Let me introduce them very quickly: Tom Dubois has only recently assumed the position of mayor. We should probably explain to our listeners that Palo Alto has a city manager form of government, and the mayor position rotates annually. But Tom Dubois has really been part of the city government for quite some time: He has served on the city council for six years and he has also served as vice mayor. He got up very, very early today to be on the HCA-podcast, so good morning, Mayor Dubois, and thank you for joining us from California.

Tom Dubois: Thanks for inviting me. It’s really a pleasure to be here.

Anja Schüler: My other guest is Professor Eckart Würzner, who has held the office of Heidelberg’s Oberbürgermeister since 2006. He is joining me from City Hall today, just down the road from the HCA. Good afternoon, Mayor Würzner.

Eckart Würzner: Hello everybody.

Anja Schüler: A little over a year ago, we received the first reports about a new lung disease affecting people in the Chinese province of Wuhan. Mayor Würzner, could you tell us when you first realized what enormous impact this would have on your city and your work?

Eckart Würzner: At the beginning, which was nearly one year ago, we couldn't really believe that a pandemic would be coming through. But then we saw the pictures from Italy: People were dying in hospitals. The preachers were dying. Doctors were dying. The country couldn't get enough medical support, and more and more people were in a terrible medical position, which was awful. So, this was a real shock for us that in Europe the pandemic was already causing so many deaths. And then we really got an idea what this means for us, also in Germany, also in Heidelberg.

Anja Schüler: Mayor DuBois, when did you first realize that this pandemic would upend politics as usual?

Tom DuBois: We had our first stay at home order in March; our city staff did start tracking the virus in January. We have an Office of Emergency Services, which is part of our police department. They traditionally focus on things like earthquakes, but within Santa Clara County, these emergency prep officers from the various cities had begun talking and tracking the virus. Our county had its first case on February 27. And by March 4, there were 300 cases in California. I don't think anybody really saw, though, how seriously it was going to be at that point, but we issued a stay at home order on March 16 and quickly had to figure out how are we going to continue to operate as a city with everybody working remotely.

Anja Schüler: Mayor Würzner, if I remember correctly, it was also in March that Heidelberg issued the first stay at home orders after helping China with medical supplies.

Eckart Würzner: Yes, at the beginning, this was the case, helping China and observing the global pandemic situation. But the city council and I then decided to have a total lockdown at a very early stage, to close the kindergartens, the schools, when the national government was just discussing what they could regarding the pandemic. Nearly one and a half weeks later, the national government took the decision for a lockdown in the first phase. Ours was a clear commitment to make sure

that we have enough capacity in our hospitals to take care of the patients. I think this was the most vulnerable point: the vulnerable people, the old people and [our goal was] to protect them as much as possible.

Anja Schüler: So that was about a year ago. Let's fast forward to the present. Mayor Dubois, could you give our listeners an idea about the anti-Corona measures in the city of Palo Alto right now?

Tom DuBois: Sure, if I could go back just a little bit. We as a city basically tried to focus on five goals: how we could slow the spread of the virus; how we could maintain our essential city services without risking the health of our city staff; other steps we could take to protect our police officers and our firefighters. We also tried to continue to offer as many services as made sense, so we did things like online ordering of books from the library, and you could pick them up in your car. The fifth goal was how could we limit public gatherings across the city? We closed playgrounds, that kind of thing. You asked about today, and I think one of the real silver linings of the virus is how quickly our staff implemented remote work from home. Even though we're here in Silicon Valley, the government still tended to lag behind, do a lot of things with paper, a lot of things in person. Because of the virus, our city government has probably advanced several years forward in their adoption of technology. That's going to be kind of a long lasting positive, I think, coming out of the virus. We moved our council meetings online, and we saw an increase in terms of public participation. More people were able to attend online, and different people were coming to our meetings. Where we are today: California just repealed its stay-at-home order last week, going back to one of the most restrictive tiers, which means that one can go to restaurants, but has to eat outdoors at socially distanced tables. Some stores can open, but they have a limit at 20 percent of their normal capacity. Barbershops, for instance, can reopen, but they must be very careful. The restaurants have been slowly reopening, but it's winter right now. The other thing is the focus on the vaccine distribution, and I think we'll probably get to that as we go on. But there's been a lot of rapid coordination of the vaccine. It started off slow, just like testing did. But I expect to see it pick up pace quite a bit.

Anja Schüler: That's a big topic in Germany, of course, vaccinations, but let me ask you this quickly, because that's a very contested issue in Germany: are schools open in Palo Alto?

Tom Dubois: Not right now. Our school district did work hard to keep them open, and we were one of the few districts in the county where elementary schools were open. It's a very tough situation. Obviously, the parents would like their kids to be back in schools. But with this latest research, the lack of intensive care beds, schools have all closed. There is talk about using the summer session to help kids catch up.

Anja Schüler: Let's just give Mayor Würzner a chance here to tell us what Heidelberg looks like right now-except for that it's snowing outside.

Eckart Würzner: Maybe a little look back and then into the future. Of course, the last year was really a lot of work in organizing masks from China via special transports. We had more than three and a half million masks sent over from China; now we're producing our own masks as we wanted to get independent from those structures. The impact on the economic situation was brutal, so we had a loss of about 100 million Euro per year in the treasure of the city – a huge amount of money. So, we need more money for vaccination, for masks and so on for the institutions. This means that there are a lot of changes at that time. Today, we are in the lucky situation that we still have quite a low rate of infections because of our very clear and strict management. This helps a lot to secure that our health system is taking care of everybody. In turn, this allows us today that we are on a quite low level again, to reopen schools and kindergartens where we just have an emergency program for children in need, a kindergarten spot when the parents are in [essential jobs], working at hospitals, and so on. The big point is: How far we can go with opening? Going out for dinner is not allowed in Heidelberg or Baden-Württemberg in general: after eight o'clock in the evening, you're not allowed to go out, you must stay at home. So, it's a total lockdown for those who would want to go out. Now, we have the discussion to reopen. But I'm very clear to say we want to do this very slowly because we don't want to have the Jo-Jo-Effect that we open too quickly. The new Covid-version from London, Ireland, and South Africa, which is much more aggressive, could drop our good data back to the situation before Christmas, where we had the highest number of patients in hospital. In sum, it's always trying to keep a balance. Yes, the economic

situation is of course difficult, and yes, we want to open kindergartens and schools as early as possible, but please don't be too fast and don't be too naive in such a situation. Still, we don't have enough vaccination products from several companies. We were ready, a perfect team for the vaccination – medical care troops, as we say – but we don't have enough vaccines. Now that's the biggest problem for us. We will, at the end of February, be able to have a high percentage of people over 80 or 85 who got a vaccination. The rest not. So, you can see it will last until June, I would say, before older people get a vaccination probably.

Anja Schüler: Both of you have now mentioned lockdown measures, you have mentioned vaccination distribution, and of course for many of these things, cities are dependent on state or federal governments. So how much leeway, how much leverage do your cities have in this pandemic to develop local solutions, for example, to protect the vulnerable groups that you have mentioned or bolster the economy? Mayor Würzner, maybe you can talk about some local initiatives in Heidelberg.

Eckart Würzner: Local initiatives ... we have organized the masks, we have supported companies free of charge if you rent a commercial space from the city for nearly a year now, so we take what the people can pay because too many people are currently unemployed. We have a good system in Germany, like a short-term employment structure. So, the state makes up part of the salaries of those who are working shorter hours at the moment till summer of this year. This is what you call the secret unemployment rate. If there wasn't such a structure in Germany, all those people would be unemployed, like the delivery drivers in the United States, for example, which are directly unemployed. In our system, we take care of them through such a system, which helps a lot. But still, the economic effect will be serious, the German and European economic situation will be heavily affected, I am totally sure.

Anja Schüler: And Heidelberg has started some local initiatives, for example, like the "Buy Local Initiative" or the "Dankesscheine" to support the local economy...

Eckart Würzner: ... and a lot of other things. We do a lot of things to help, to make it easy, to help those shops, for example, to distribute their products now online who are not able till that time to use such modern technology – of course, it is not a modern technology, especially not in Silicon Valley. But for some shop owners, online was

still not their selling line at that time. We also had the army in our senior residencies, to support testing to reduce the infection rate. There are many additional programs; we also running vaccination centers now in our cities, which are organized by the cities. Just the vaccines are coming from the state.

Anja Schüler: And what does the situation look like in Palo Alto? What mandates do you have to consider? And maybe you can tell us about some local solutions.

Tom Dubois: We got a lot of things that are quite like Heidelberg, so the counties had some pretty strict guidelines to follow. But a lot of the recovery efforts really fell on us as a city. We have what we call a Citizen's Council that we convene in emergencies, and it includes all the local hospitals, our business, our Chamber of Commerce, and some neighborhood leaders. And we got that body started very early meeting regularly, and we got a lot of feedback about what our businesses needed and how to support them. You know, we have a lot of fine restaurants here in Palo Alto; they were hit very hard as well as fitness centers. And so, we closed some streets so that they could set up outdoor dining, including using the street areas. We also started a fundraising campaign so people could donate money. We set up a non-profit so people could donate that money tax free, then it would be distributed to local businesses. And then we really focused a lot on communication. We've set up an online newsletter. We also had some neighborhood websites and services, and so we leveraged all of that. We got a pretty large percentage of the population signing up for daily e-mail updates on the virus. We did have to make some severe budget cuts. We had to cut about 40 million dollars out of our 200-million-dollar budget. The city did do a good job of documenting that we were eligible to get some federal grants as a city to help pay for some of our coronavirus activities. And then again, we're in a big county where San Jose is at the southern end, a very large city that dominates the county. We weren't getting a lot of testing centers at the northern end where Palo Alto is. So, one of the things the city did is work with some providers to set up some pop-up testing units in addition to the testing that's going on at the hospitals and some of the medical providers.

Anja Schüler: Mayor Dubois, you mentioned an email newsletter. I thought that was interesting because in a crisis like a pandemic or a natural catastrophe, communication is really the key, and that goes for communication between the levels

of government as well as for communicating the measures to the population. So were there other ways, other than the newsletter for you to reach out to the residents of Palo Alto?

Tom Dubois: We really use all the different channels we have. There's an online Web site called *Next Door*, which is set up neighborhood by neighborhood. We leverage that quite a bit. And for the vaccinations, we started getting ambassadors, who are people that are networked, they have their own groups of people. And we've been starting to pass out information about vaccines to them, and they distribute it to their groups either, you know, on phone or through the Web or so; we try to leverage all these forms of communication to get the word out.

Anja Schüler: Mayor Würzner, how does that work in Heidelberg? How do you communicate with the citizens of Heidelberg?

Eckart Würzner: I think the situation is totally new for us – we increasingly need to employ the digital world. I'm communicating a lot about my Instagram account, about all the new information, about what's going on in the city. The city has its own Instagram, we have our own Facebook account, where we give all the information, and of course, the city homepage on the Internet. We hold all our city council meetings via Skype or Teams meetings now, so this is totally changing. Also, our behavior in the city parliament, when you think about 48 people discussing a topic where everybody has a different position, makes it very complicated, and it's not really the way into the future. But we need it, we use it much more: I have about 80 percent of my staff in home office, but they're still doing 100 percent of the work. Those who are not able to go and work at home, of course, the waste management collection and others, they must stay and drive the truck, but all the others are now in a totally new mode of working. This is so new for us, and it is a drastic change compared to the situation one year ago. But this was really a push, as Tom mentioned this also for Palo Alto, a push for Heidelberg, for the new digital structures instead of paperwork. This was very positive and is also very positive. But we also need to think that some people are not so convinced of those tools, especially the older people. We must take care and consider how we can reach them, if we just concentrate on those communication instruments. But this is the way into the future, and this will be the future. I would say we will reduce home office after the pandemic, but not to the time

before the pandemic, so there will be a big shift. Also, office space is available now in downtown and many cities of Germany, you have lots of space, of office space now, and in the future, which is totally changing our city planning policy. And so, overall, such a structure, I think also led to a totally different policy on the local level.

Anja Schüler: I already mentioned in my introduction that both Palo Alto and Heidelberg are home to world class universities and research institutions, medical research in particular; how does that affect the way your cities handle the pandemic? Maybe we hear about Palo Alto and probably Stanford University first.

Tom Dubois: Yes, Stanford has been an important partner for us. They were part of this Citizen's Core Council that I mentioned, the emergency council. They initially planned to have some of their students return in the fall. They were going to split up their classes, but then they canceled that. So, they've had some graduate students that are doing research on campus, but very limited. The campus has pretty much been locked down. We're a small city, so that's about 30.000 people that have been missing from our economy. Stanford has played a really important role on the health care front as well. They provided some of the best Covid testing for the community. They set up some drive through testing that was very efficient: in five minutes - I went there several times myself - you could get a test and you generally got your results in 24 hours or less. We've also been working with them on research, so Palo Alto runs its own utilities, and we've been looking at testing for Covid in the wastewater, working with Stanford University on that front. We've also been talking with some of their experts about what the workplace of the future might look like. Well, as we start to go through this recovery, the question is, how many people are going to start commuting back to Palo Alto? Are offices going to be reconfigured? And they are going through all that planning themselves just for their campus. But obviously, they're also looking at research across the U.S. Then, the last thing I wanted to mention was we've accelerated our development of broadband Internet to the whole and, you know, this situation with the virus has really highlighted the need for kind of a better, more robust Internet.

Anja Schüler: We have a similar situation here in Heidelberg, where students make up a sizable part of the population. So how has the closing of the university affected Heidelberg?

Eckart Würzner: We are a university town, as you already mentioned, and it's very sad to be a university city without students joining us and meeting here in Heidelberg; this is awful for us. They are not in the city and the student housings is empty. Nobody's here as they work from home. They're not coming here from overseas, as we normally are a very international university like Stanford. Also, we have the biggest university clinic in Germany here, with more than one million patients per year. That's why we are a hotspot of medical care in Germany, and there is a very special focus on what's going on in Heidelberg. So, we must take care of that, especially also these clinics give support to everybody and still beside Covid, we have the cancer research and treatment, we have all the other necessary medical programs that have to continue. This is not easy. But still, I think we could manage it very well. We are very pleased that we had a task force meeting every week at the beginning of the pandemic, now about every three weeks, our task force meeting between the city, the military, the Red Cross and the university clinic, and we are talking about what will be the next steps now and what will be the next step in the future. What do we need, masks or whatever, what can we do with the schools? We have always a big debate in this task force. What can be the best steps for Heidelberg next? And I think this helps a lot also to give us the power to say, that's now the decision we should take, because there is a huge political debate about every decision you make, now. But I think we're on a good way. We hope that the Covid numbers will be dropping in the spring because it's getting warmer. But still, we are far away from a normal life in Heidelberg.

Anja Schüler: Mayor Würzner, I would like to elaborate a little bit on what you just said. Medical experts tell us that we can expect more global pandemics in the years to come. What have cities learned over this past year? And how important is urban resilience or developing urban resilience in an existential situation like a pandemic or a natural catastrophe? Or in other words, what can cities do to increase resilience against an existential crisis? Maybe you want to go first, Mayor Würzner.

Eckart Würzner: Now, that's a good question. I think that the most important thing is that you need a good administration. I think that's what the citizens need. They need an administration they can trust. Where I have the feeling, OK, everything is still running, as Tom already mentioned, waste management, medical care, not only for

Covid patients, that we take care about expanding the fiberglass network, all those needs – we call them local services – which are of tremendous importance also in such a crisis. I think this is very important that citizens trust us that we have the newest information from the international science boards, which is absolutely true. That is exactly what we try to achieve.

Anja Schüler: What about urban resilience in Palo Alto?

Tom Dubois: Again, our attention has really shifted to our recovery strategy and how do we manage through the pandemic, both from a health perspective as well as an economic perspective. We've been shifting some of our funding around. One thing in terms of resilience, I think is looking at, again, office buildings and the air quality in those buildings. And so, we've been looking at technologies to upgrade and retrofit, such as heating and air conditioning systems to filter out viruses and other kinds of particles. The last several years, we've had bad fires. And even though the fires weren't that close to Palo Alto, the air quality was at dangerous levels. And so, we see these kinds of investments in air quality systems as real long-term investments. The other thing with everybody wearing masks – we had no flu season this year. And so, I think it just shows how that can really benefit people. And then on the revenue side for Palo Alto, a lot of our revenue comes from hotel tax for both business and tourism. And so, we are looking like a city in terms of the question: what do we need to do to be able to fund city services if people start telecommuting more? Our business mix may need to change, which has been heavily reliant on commuters and kind of our daytime population. I think a lot of our businesses in town are going to need to do the same thing. Our daytime population was basically three times our night-time population. So, a lot of businesses were really focused on workers who would come in during the day and more people start telecommuting, you know, I think all that balance must get shifted. And then the last thing I'd say in terms of resilience is we've really been talking about how to handle multiple emergencies at the same time when a lot of attention has been on Covid-19. However, it is also about being ready if we get that big earthquake that's been predicted for a long time, or we had some big rains coming in. We have to deal with flooding or other things. And so just really making sure that we're prepared. We have a program where the residents signed up as emergency response volunteers, and you get trained to deal with these kinds of

emergencies, and during the pandemic, it's kind of been revitalized. We've had a lot of people sign up. And so, again, that's another silver lining in really helping us get people reengaged.

Anja Schüler: Mayor Dubois, Mayor Würzner, thank you so much for your time today and for your insights about the responses of Palo Alto and Heidelberg to the Covid-19 pandemic. It's really been a pleasure talking to you. You have been listening to the HCA podcast, I am Anja Schüler, and before I say goodbye, I would like to remind you that Heidelberg University concludes the Ruperto-Carola-Ringvorlesung this week. For this last event, Heidelberg historian Manfred Berg talked to heute journal anchorman Claus Kleber about where the United States are headed after the inauguration of the 46 president – “Quo Vadis USA?” Watch this conversation on heiONLINE starting Friday, January 29. Our podcast will be back next week, and I will be talking to Cosima Werner, an urban geographer at Heidelberg University, about the food crisis in the United States. For now, I would like to once again thank my guests for joining me, I would like to thank everybody who made this podcast possible, and I would like to thank you for listening. We hope you will tune in next week. Until then, please stay safe and healthy.