

David Agnew

London: David Agnew is the co-founder of Civic Square. Civic Square is a real estate development and consulting firm specializing in public/private partnership. They focus on the public realm. It is also important to note that David is chair of South Carolina Advisory Council for the Trust for Public Land. David, welcome.

Agnew: Thank you. It is a pleasure to be here with you.

London: We are talking about vision but before we get to that point, I would like you to set the stage for us in terms of how you think we are doing in the state South Carolina.

Agnew: Well, first, I think we have an abundance of resources to work with. Not just in a natural sense, which we certainly do if you look around the country. You take a small state that has beautiful mountains and has a very long coastline, right off the bat that gives us a huge advantage. In terms of our people, we have a huge advantage, too. In terms of our history, we have a rich textural history that is very interesting to study and to learn about so I think we have some inherit natural advantages in the global competitive market. I don't think our politics and leadership have always accentuated the positive and I think we have a ways to go in that regard. But in many ways, I think we are poised to do great things if we make some good decisions in the coming years.

London: So in the coming years what would you say your vision for the state of South Carolina might be?

Agnew: I believe if I had to highlight three areas that I hope we will act on in the near term, the first would be coming up with a mechanism and a plan for deciding how we want to grow physically as a state and what we want to look like as a state. How you grow and how you are physically is very important and that is why we live in the places we live. Because we love them. We love the way they look; the way it feels to walk down the street or through the woods. So that physical nature of our lives is a very important part of who we are as individuals and as a state. The things we need to do, in my opinion, first of all, is to make sure our towns and cities are nice places to live in. I don't just mean by that Charleston, but I mean all towns. Our very small towns need to be nice places. Our larger cities need to be nice places. Our rural counties need to be protected and made to be enjoyable places to live. That is a long, long discussion but if we did that, if we made our small towns or big cities and rural counties nicer places to be, I think that would be a big step forward for the state.

Secondly, we need to protect our natural resources and that is huge asset and a huge advantage that we have in the competitive world. The fact that we can be in downtown Charleston and drive 20 minutes and be in the Ace Basin is a huge

1 competitive advantage that we need to recognize and protect. Finally, I think in
2 terms of making our state a nicer physical place, we need to have some decision
3 making process that allows us to choose as a people what we think is important
4 and choose how we will grow. Right now we don't have that mechanism in
5 place. In terms of the physical nature of our state, putting that mechanism in
6 place, I believe is very important.

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8 **1:44:15** In addition to the physical nature of our state, I think the economic and
9 educational opportunities that our children are provided, is extremely important.
10 Obviously, education is an issue that is discussed constantly, yet we have not
11 quite figured it out on a statewide level. We haven't figured out how to make our
12 kindergarten through twelfth grade schools do what they need to do. To not only
13 to compete with children in the southeast much less for them to compete in the
14 global market place. So figuring out how to make our schools work well is
15 extremely important and we haven't figured that out. I am encouraged with what
16 our new Superintendent of Education says. I think Jim Rex is a creative guy and I
17 think he is putting some creative ideas on the table, but that is a long term
18 discussion that needs to be sustained over decades. I believe looking back to
19 the 1980's, for a minute, I believe Dick Riley started that conversation and as a
20 state we didn't sustain it like we should have. So let's restart that conversation
21 and let's sustain it over the decades that it needs to be sustained. We need a
22 higher education system that promotes research and development and really
23 begins to tie into the economy at that point. Because the point of a great
24 education system is for it to create economic opportunity. That is not the only
25 point but it certainly is an important one. So when our institutions of higher
26 education and our research institutions start feeding the economic growth of our
27 state, I think that will be a great thing.

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29 **London: In the interim, what do we need to be doing to begin to address
30 these issues? 1:45:07**

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32 **Agnew:** The debates on these specific issues would be made better if we had
33 an overarching, more positive, more forward looking attitude as a people.
34 Instead of focusing on divisive issues like we do quite often, focus on the facts,
35 not the emotions. Focus on the future not the past. Those sound like vagaries,
36 but I really believe as a state you can adopt an attitude that we are all in this
37 together and we should be looking forward and we should be cooperating with
38 each other and not throwing stones at each other. I believe that the overall
39 positive attitude that we have always done so well with, we could do better.

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42 **London: You are talking about our need to embrace big picture thinking.**

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44 **Agnew:** Yes, I believe it is and it is just the way you carry yourself as a state and
45 the confidence that you have as a state. If you set out as a state and as a group
46 of people and say, we are going to move forward, then we are going to have to

1 figure out the answers to these questions. Yes, they are tough questions, but we
2 are all in it together. Most of us want to find constructive answers. I believe
3 when you get outside the political realm, that most people are living their
4 everyday lives and they want to find answers to the questions. They want the
5 schools to work. They want our national forest to be protected. They want their
6 city streets to be safe. What the leaders have to do is then recognize in a very
7 real sense that the people they are representing want things to get done. When
8 leaders start putting more emphasis on their political futures than on solving
9 problems, that is when we have a real let down as a state. Too often that has
10 occurred in this state. We've had a history of great political personalities but
11 quite often not enough of a history of leaders sitting down and solving tough
12 problems in a long term way.

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14 **London: David, do you think that the children of today will be better or**
15 **worse off than we are when they grow up? 1:47:50**

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17 **Agnew:** Well certainly, I'm betting that they will be better off. I wouldn't bet any
18 other way but I believe that is an outcome that is yet to be determined in many
19 ways. I have a son who is 20 months old and I am certainly betting his future will
20 be better. I couldn't let myself think any other way. But the world is becoming so
21 much more connected and so much more competitive, that in many ways it is a
22 scary thing. Our children will be competing against children all over the world for
23 jobs. How that looks 20 years from now, I don't know, but when I read what
24 people like Thomas Friedman write and I look down that long road, we need to
25 be making decisions now which we think are going to give our children a better
26 chance 20 years from now to get that job.

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28 **London: I think you probably already answered my next question but I will**
29 **ask it anyway in case you wanted to add anything. What responsibilities**
30 **do you think that SC leaders have regarding future generations of South**
31 **Carolinians? 1:48:50**

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33 **Agnew:** First and foremost, I believe we need to make wise decisions and make
34 thoughtful decisions that are based on facts, not just emotion. I heard once an
35 anthropologist who said that his vision of a great community is one that creates
36 many windows of opportunity for children. He said that you never know when a
37 child's window is going to be open for inspiration. It could occur when they are
38 eight or thirteen, but his ideal community, he said, was for so many things to be
39 going on in that community that whenever that child's window opens, so that
40 child could be inspired to greatness or so that child could be inspired to do what
41 his or her calling was, is that something would be there to fill that window. I think
42 that is a great way of looking at the state. If you are an eight year old child and
43 you are going to be called to be a great violinist, hopefully somewhere in SC, you
44 are going to be able to go hear a great violinist play. If you are going to be called
45 to be a great artist and your window of opportunity opens when you are eleven
46 years old, hopefully there is going to be an art class, Hopefully the education

1 system is going to fill those windows with so many different, stimulating
2 experiences that those children are going to be able to be inspired and they can
3 achieve what they deserve to achieve.

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5 I also heard Mayor Riley say one time when asked why he was doing something
6 that was fairly unpopular. They said if you took a poll of your citizens, they
7 certainly would not vote for that. He said that he never viewed leadership as a
8 poll taking exercise. He said it is not my job to take a poll to figure out where my
9 people want to go right now. He said I view it as my job to recognize the best
10 instincts of my citizens and then try to convince them to go do those things that
11 are their best instincts. I believe as a state if we had leaders who everyday tried
12 to help us achieve those elements of ourselves that are our best instincts then
13 we will have a better state 20 years from now.

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15 I guess there is one other thing that I could hope for our leadership. That would
16 be that our leaders try to bring out our best instincts and try to inspire us to do
17 great things as a state and as a people. **1:51:36**

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19 **London: Well said. Now I want to give you the opportunity to elaborate on**
20 **a couple of the issues that I know are important to you.**

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22 **Agnew:** The physical growth of our state is extremely important. We have
23 started to make some great strides in this state. One of the areas of success that
24 we can point to, I believe, is the natural resource protection efforts that have
25 occurred here. Just south of Charleston is the Ace Basin, now the Ernest F.
26 Hollings Ace Basin, because Senator Hollings was so successful in bringing
27 federal money to SC to protect hundreds of thousands of acres of beautiful land
28 and water. I think all over the state we've started to protect our natural resources
29 and do a better job of that. We founded the SC Conservation Bank a few short
30 years ago and it is starting to get the funding it need. It is not quite there yet. I
31 think it needs more and more. With the Trust for Public Land we are raising
32 money to protect Morris Island as we speak. It is a very important natural and
33 historical resource for this state. It is located at the mouth of the Charleston
34 Harbor, about 125 acres, privately owned and always under the threat of
35 development. Not that you could develop many homes out there. It was the
36 setting for the movie "Glory." The big charge of the Massachusetts 54 occurred
37 on Morris Island. It was one of the most fought over pieces of land during the
38 Civil War because it was so strategically important. Until last year, it was always
39 under the threat of development and we never quite knew what was going to
40 happen to it and then a very generous developer got it under contract and we
41 worked with him. The Trust for Public Land worked with Bobby Ginn so that he is
42 going to sell us Morris Island for 2 million dollars less than he paid for it, and we
43 are going to turn it into a public park. So I believe taking those kinds of efforts,
44 taking our natural resources and protecting them, and public and private
45 institutions working together to make those things happen is something that
46 needs to occur more in this state. **1:54:06**

1 **London: We are certainly hearing some good things from you and the**
2 **work that you are doing and look forward to hearing more from you.**

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4 **Agnew:** If I may, I am also passionate about downtown development. As you
5 can see, we are overlooking King Street right now and if you look at the corner,
6 just across the street, 20 years ago that was an empty site. Now you can walk
7 outside, hear the horns and sounds of people shopping. That's the kind of
8 downtown development I get passionate about because I think it is so important.
9 If we do more of that for our towns and cities and make them nicer places to live
10 and to work, then our state will be better off, I believe. All these things are tough.
11 They take a long time to achieve. That hotel across the street took probably 15
12 years from conception to reality. The waterfront park here in Charleston took 13
13 years. All the places that we love took a long time to get created and that has
14 been true throughout history. We just need to have the staying power and the
15 courage to make those good things happen. Not to just protect our natural
16 resources, but for creating a human habitat in our downtowns that is worthy.

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18 **London: Resources for the rest of us, the human animals.**

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20 **Agnew:** Yes, human habitat. **1:55:27**

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22 **London: I think it is important to mention, David, that while you are in real**
23 **estate development, that you have been involved in the public partnership**
24 **side of things as well.**

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26 **Agnew:** Yes, I spent five years here in Charleston working with Mayor Joe Riley
27 and from him, really developed my passion for real estate development because
28 he is in many ways a public real estate developer. The decisions that he makes
29 as mayor everyday help make this community a better place and helps all of
30 Charleston work better. He brings to it a very high level of sophistication when it
31 comes to the physical development of Charleston. You know that he started the
32 Mayors Institute on City Design about 15 years ago which is one of the most
33 successful public-private partnerships in America. Over 800 mayors have gone
34 through this training program. I used to meet these mayors at the mayors'
35 meetings every year. When they found out I worked for Mayor Joe Riley, they
36 would sometimes tear up and tell me how the Mayors' Institute on City Design
37 had changed their life. These were big city and small town mayors from all over
38 the country that really felt passionate because the Mayors' Institute on City
39 Design helped them understand how important the physical elements of their
40 cities are and helped give them the tools that they can use as mayor to change
41 their cities for the better.

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43 **London: Any other items you would like to bring up in terms of areas of**
44 **passion.**

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1 **Agnew:** I believe this general idea that we need to adopt a positive forward
2 thinking attitude as a state is something that is extremely important. It's hard to
3 give specific examples but I believe that you know it when you see it. You know it
4 when you see a state that has a positive, can do attitude and a state that has
5 leaders that call forth our best instincts. You know when that has happened. I
6 believe we have elements of that going on in South Carolina but I don't think that
7 that's our prevailing leadership model. If there was one thing I could change in
8 South Carolina, I believe I would try to create or help create a leadership model
9 that accentuates the positive. That's based on fact, not emotion. That looks
10 forward, not backward. If we could do that one thing, if we could all of a sudden
11 have a group of leaders that had that attitude, then I think the people of South
12 Carolina would respond to that. I believe all of the issues that we've talked
13 about, whether it's growth or education or creating jobs, on all those fronts, we
14 would be better off as a state, the moment that leadership attitude changes.

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16 **London: We certainly look forward to hearing more from you.**

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18 **Agnew:** Thank you.

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20 **London: I have been speaking with David Agnew, co-founder of Civic**
21 **Square. He's also chair of the SC Advisory Council for the Trust for Public**
22 **Land.**

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24 **For the Jim Self Center on the Future, I'm Donna London.**

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