

Mayor of Fremont, Dr. Raj Salwan – Learning About Law; Podcast Episode 9

Dakshata Anand (Host): Hi everyone, I'm Dakshata and this is indeed my first radio show on Radio Zindagi. My mom had been an RJ on Radio Zindagi and my dad's very involved, so it seems only fitting that one day I'd end up making an introduction. But you're listening to my show, Learning about law - started as a legal podcast, and since I'm a native here, I thought to use this opportunity to reach more people and invite notable guests like Mayor Salwan, who I'll be introducing very shortly and essentially communicate the same legal news that I would through the newsletter, through the podcast, but on the radio. So today we're kicking off the podcast with an exemplary guest - I'm joined by the mayor of Fremont, Dr. Raj Salwan, a lifelong Fremont resident, dedicated veterinarian and passionate community leader. Over the past two decades, he's balanced running a veterinary practice with serving in multiple civic roles, from the Human Relations Commission to the City Council and now as mayor of Fremont since December of 2024. Known for championing city initiatives that improve quality of life, expand housing and foster innovation, Mayor Salwan brings a unique blend of compassion, business acumen and community vision to city leadership. It is an honor to interview him today on the podcast during Learning About Law's first ever airing on a radio show as well. Mayor Salwan, it's a pleasure to have you as a guest on Learning About Law.

Mayor Salwan: Dakshata, it's a great honor to be here. I'm excited to be on your first time on Radio Zindagi!

Dakshata Anand (Host): Yes, me as well! I'm very excited for this opportunity, so let's dive right into it. Growing up and building your career here, what personal values or life experiences most shaped your approach to leadership?

Mayor Salwan: Well, you know, I grew up here in Fremont. Um, you know, my parents were immigrants. And so, I learned a lot from my parents because they kind of sacrificed a lot to come to this country, you know, successful careers and lives and doing odd jobs, you know, to get by. So I learned a lot of values, like, you know, values of hard work, you know, being persistent, you know, resilience. And all those values were very helpful. I recall we used to live in a one bedroom apartment with myself and my two siblings and my parents.

Dakshata Anand (Host): Wow.

Mayor Salwan: Yeah. And so, you know, times were tough back then. And, you know, now we don't normally experience racism or other things, but I could I could visually and hear all the racism my father had to go through just to, you know, get by. And so, uh, so, so all those, uh,

issues as far as, like, you know, being poor, housing insecurity, moving so many times, you know, being the outsider in this community, you might not think of it today, but, uh, at that time, I was like the only Indian American in my class, and they weren't very many. And half the people thought I was a Native American.

Dakshata Anand (Host): Oh, God.

Mayor Salwan: Yeah. Yeah. So those, um, those values, uh, you know, those basics, you know, being humble, working hard, being persistent, I think they carry with me today.

Dakshata Anand (Host): Yeah, that is just an unbelievable start because you grow up a lot faster just facing that - but it also shapes, I'm sure, your approach today to city leadership.

Mayor Salwan: Definitely.

Dakshata Anand (Host): So you attended UC Irvine and consequently attended veterinary school for four years, where you saw massive success being in honor societies and making the Dean's list each year, which congratulations, by the way. You also pursued this in your profession for decades, and I wanted to ask what inspired you to pursue social work through roles from the Human Relations Commission or City Council at the same time?

Mayor Salwan: Well, you know, veterinary medicine is one of those professions where you really have to care for the pets and be compassionate. And also you have to be good at problem solving. Like most doctors, you know, you have an issue and you have to figure out what the disease is. And so those skill sets were very helpful to me as I got into government, because you have to care for your constituents and you also have to solve problems. Um, and what was a definite experience that helped me a lot - opened my eyes - was getting on the Human Relations Commission. Prior to that and every time I wanted to be in politics, I just wanted to be successful. You know, in my career, I have a family and I wasn't into all this politics. But once I got on there, I saw all the issues and concerns we have in our community. And it kind of made me feel that, well, you know, there's a lot more that maybe I'm not doing enough for. And so that got me hooked. And then from there I went on planning commission and then city council.

Dakshata Anand (Host): And now you're mayor. That's awesome. And it's great to hear how getting involved in one facet really inspired you to keep pursuing it. Was there any specific policy or initiative that you remember as really, you know, hitting you hard or something that really made you think that this is something that I want to change?

Mayor Salwan: Well, there's a lot of things you don't like because of my background and my experiences. I've experienced things differently than a lot of typical politicians. You know, many

people, they get out of college and they go into politics, and then they, you know, it's a never ending cycle. And so my private sector experience was very helpful to me. And just my, you know, again, being an outsider when I was young to the struggle to survival, I think those all kind of shaped me. And so, you know, a lot of times in politics, they have a lot of performative politics and there's a lot of virtue signaling. You know, we need more affordable housing or we need this, but then they don't do anything. So I want to be one of those individuals that actually is getting stuff done. So that's very important to me. That's why I have a GTD. That's my little hashtag, you know, "getting things done". I think that's the most important thing you can do in government. And so I'm always trying to see how can I make things happen. And so that requires working sometimes with people that don't agree with each other. Um, you know, I was one of the few people that was both chairman of the Democratic Party as well as chairman of the Chamber of Commerce.

Dakshata Anand (Host): Oh, wow.

Mayor Salwan: Two groups that almost never agreed.

Dakshata Anand (Host): Yes.

Mayor Salwan: And so I because I can think from different angles, I'm able to, you know, resolve the issues that some other folks may not be able to. So those skill sets are very helpful to me.

Dakshata Anand (Host): Yeah. I think that it is pivotal for law to be able to see multiple perspectives and find a bridge between them, rather than just sticking to them, especially in this time.

Mayor Salwan: And as an aspiring lawyer, you know that it's better to frame the argument of the other party so that you can understand it better so that you can frame your own argument in a better way. And same thing when politics. I try to think, you know, how does this person think? How do they view it? How do I view it? And how do you find the middle ground?

Dakshata Anand (Host): Yeah. And that's an awesome ideology. I think it's especially relevant in today's time - and it's inspiring for youth to see and kind of tailor their arguments that way.

Mayor Salwan: And especially with youth now, you know, they only see one way. So sometimes you have to be able to understand all sides.

Dakshata Anand (Host): Guilty! Yes, and I think the most powerful arguments or politicians or essentially any sort of lawyer would be one that can handle any sort of objection and still be able to adapt and craft a way out.

Mayor Salwan: Absolutely.

Dakshata Anand (Host): So that makes sense. And so from what I'm hearing, it sounds more so that there were guiding overarching principles that were pushing you towards specific policy reforms, which is fantastic to hear. And I really want to go more so into your career and do a deep dive. So within the first half of your first year as Mayor of Fremont, you've overseen various initiatives from the Water Quality Improvement Pilot Project at Lake Elizabeth, creating affordable housing communities of over 560 new homes for low income residents, or overseeing the beginning of a six building campus designed to power the next generation of tech - these are all incredibly exciting initiatives. What's driven you to prioritize these particular projects, and how do they connect to your broader vision for the city?

Mayor Salwan: Well, you know, my vision is simple. You know, I believe that we need to have a sustainable, safe environment that embraces innovation and also have good quality of life for our residents. And so, um, so besides those issues, I mean, public safety has always been a huge concern. I always believe that before we can do anything else, we must feel safe.

Dakshata Anand (Host): Of course.

Mayor Salwan: And so I've always wanted to make Fremont the safest large city in the country. So we're working towards that. We're adding more police officers. We're adding hiring more lateral officers, giving them bonuses to come to our city. We've expanded our fire department. You know, for the first time in 20 years, we have a new fire company which is 14 more firefighters. And so that reduces, um, you know, the response time when somebody calls 911, many times people think when you call firefighters that they put out fires. But nowadays, mostly being like the ambulance service - somebody had a heart attack or those sort of things. So having more service definitely helps. Um, you know, the water quality that's, you know, preserving our environment for future generations. Um, so besides that, we've also planned 2400 trees. We are goaled to go to net zero by 2045. We, um, have a very bold climate action plan, so we are all in on combating climate change. Uh, we've added more EV infrastructure, EV cars in our fleet, solar panels, so we're doing everything in anything.

Dakshata Anand (Host): You're getting things done!

Mayor Salwan: Yes! Um, then innovation. You know I'm very proud of the innovation district we have in the city of Fremont. You know, for a long time we were known as a bedroom community. So we really people just left Fremont and they slept here. Now, I'm proud to say we have more people coming to Fremont than living in Fremont, which is good, because that means we have more business, more revenues, more innovative companies. So that innovation district, we've got

Tesla, Western Digital, Seagate, Quanta, Delta, um, Bloom Energy, and there's so many others like you would never believe just looking outside the building what kind of companies are here in Fremont. So that has been a huge game changer for us. I'm very excited about that. Just continuing to bring more, um, more of those kinds of companies. And now we're all in on the AI boom. You know, that's huge for us. And the quantum computers, which is next. We have a company here that's going to disrupt that market as well.

Dakshata Anand (Host): Wow. That's unbelievable. And how did you set up this agenda? You had this vision right when you came into the role, or are there some things that when you step in you got an idea of?

Mayor Salwan: I'm a great student, so I'm always learning. So I've been a city council member for ten years. So during all my time I was well-read, I studied. I'm always looking, arguing different sides. So I think I was ready to hit the ground running. One thing about me is whatever I ever promise is exactly what I did. I never made a promise that I could not do so the things I'm implementing now are the same things I ran on. And one of the big issues we have talked about is unhoused community, the homeless. So that's something that I've been working hard to reduce homelessness in Fremont. So, you know, try to get people out of these permanent encampments, get them into shelter, help them with mental health, addiction support services, and then building permanent affordable housing. So that's kind of what we're trying to do. I, for one, would like to see the issue resolved, you know, but not run away from the problem. And we have unhoused people. We can't just push them to another city. Of course we want to take care of them, help them, and then get them into affordable housing. So that's what I'm pushing for so that people on the street can say, you know what? This is what they said. This is what they did. And I'm seeing a difference in my neighborhood.

Dakshata Anand (Host): Yeah, that's really neat.

Mayor Salwan: So, as you can see, over the past year, we've increased a lot of the events we're having. There's much more stuff for people to do. We are the hub for the Indian American communities, but we can definitely do even more so. So that's one of my visions.

Dakshata Anand (Host): That's great to hear. And thank you for elaborating on that.

Mayor Salwan: We want you to come back to Fremont, Dakshata.

Dakshata Anand (Host): Yes, that is going to be the new goal. And I'm a little scared because you don't say anything that you can't get done. So I might end up actually moving back here!

Mayor Salwan: Yeah. I mean, it's a great family friendly, number one place for families. One of the safest large cities. Uh, happiest city for six years in a row. So we're going to keep making it even happier.

Dakshata Anand (Host): That's awesome. That's great to hear. Okay, so I wanted to ask something about just your past experiences informing your present. In retrospect, how did these past experiences of yours, such as serving as chairperson for the Fremont Chamber of Commerce or Columnist for the Tri-City voice, prepare you for this time of yours as Mayor?

Mayor Salwan: Well, you know, the Chamber of Commerce was a great role because it made me understand the concerns that businesses have so I really took that to heart. Uh, especially our small businesses, you know, they're on the front line, especially local small businesses because a lot of times they're underfunded. They don't have the, you know, expertise or how to navigate the bureaucracy. And so that's something that I learned a lot. And then second was being a Columnist allowed me to be more analytical, write better, and communicate more precisely. And so it allowed me to develop a different, more creative aspect of myself. So both of those come together. I'm always thinking about the small business owner. You know, like, your dad's a restaurant owner, right?

Dakshata Anand (Host): Yes, he is!

Mayor of Salwan: So, a person like him wants to do these wonderful restaurants, but they get glitches, right? So then sometimes you need elected officials who understand that if this individual can't resolve this issue, it may cost them tens of hundreds of thousands of dollars. So time is money. Somebody understands that can help speed things up and talk to the planners and say, hey, you guys are just causing delays, can we just, you know, get this going and then we can work on the other issues as he's working?

Dakshata Anand (Host): That 100% make sense and completely agree. Maybe I should become a columnist because I struggle with saying my points concisely, especially in writing I'm more so of a speech writer that way. So that's great to hear how both being in action and also being in the back end and reporting through the Columnist position helped just shape your approach.

Mayor Salwan: It helps you clarify your thoughts by writing. So I'd encourage you to write every day.

Dakshata Anand (Host): Yes. That's awesome. That's great to hear. I wanted to just kind of pick your brain about some broader legal and policy reflections, because I just think it's fascinating to hear about your vision and what you want to see within the next few months or even years from the City of Fremont. So my first question is from your years of civic service. How have you seen

local laws and policies shape the day to day quality of life for residents? And how can everyday people better engage with those laws to strengthen their communities?

Mayor of Salwan: Well, you know, I'll say that most people underestimate local government. So a lot of times they look at, you know, President Trump or, you know, Congress, but the way they live in Fremont, California, is more shaped by your local council member or Mayor than whether Trump passes a tariff.

Dakshata Anand (Host): That makes sense.

Mayor Salwan: Yeah. So, you know, if you call the police, you want a quick response - that's something that's the local government. You know, if you call 911, if somebody had a heart attack, you want the fire department to come right away, your ambulance, you want it to be right around the corner after that. Um, if you have a pothole in your street, you know, you want to get that fixed. If your school is not teaching a certain course, that's important. That's again a local government, of course. So you can see how you know, from the moment you leave your house to the streets, right to safety concerns, local government has a big impact. How we live in Fremont or in the Bay area is much different than people that live in Austin, Texas or Birmingham, Alabama - they all have subcultures, and so I would encourage everybody to get more involved in local government. Um, you know, for example, if you want to change a national law, you need to get all those Congress members, majority, to say yes. So one of the good and bad about a Congress member is you can make all kinds of speeches, you can make all these pledges. But to actually get something done is very, very difficult, of course, because getting a majority of Congress is very hard. Whereas in City Council you can get four council members to agree and you can get something done.

Dakshata Anand (Host): Oh, really?

Mayor Salwan: Yeah.

Dakshata Anand (Host): That's amazing.

Mayor Salwan: Yeah. So I would encourage more people to pay attention to local government, get involved in their communities. You don't have to be in elected office. You can be, you know, the PTA, you can be in the local Chamber of Commerce. You could be in your local neighborhood association, HOA, whatever. But I think most importantly, I encourage everybody to get involved, especially Indian Americans. Very often we are very successful in personal careers but not so involved in the community. And I think that is very important, especially sometimes you see some of the bias, you know, that you're seeing nowadays. And the more we are involved in the community, more people see that we are just like them. We want good things

for our community. We're giving back and that, you know, we're trying to do everything we can to make our community. The only thing we sometimes in government we don't have control over is like, what kind of business comes here? But we're going to do our best to try to incentivize the kind that we don't have. So I want to get more entertainment, more nightlife. You know, like I said, pubs, lounges, So I think it has a huge impact. So sometimes the headlines, you know, they sound exciting and sexy, but I think more we just need to focus on how we live here, what kind of culture we want or things we want to get done in our community.

Dakshata Anand (Host): So I have a follow up with that - as Mayor, do you want to see a higher engagement of requests coming in from residents of Fremont to the council members? Are you seeing a high degree of residents communicating - or not as much as you like?

Mayor Salwan: You know, a lot of people, I'll be honest with you, they just complain. But they don't actually come to the meetings. They'll complain after the fact.

Dakshata Anand (Host): I see.

Mayor Salwan: So they're not really clued in. But then something happens in front of their house, they're like oh what is this thing here. So what I would say is get involved early. Know what's going on. Pay attention. You know, so that if something does come up, you've heard about it six months before, you know, then you can talk to your council member or your mayor and say, hey, you know, what is this? Or give some feedback. But I would encourage everybody to, you know get more involved.

Dakshata Anand (Host): Yeah. And how can they do this? I mean, of course, I studied political science, so I'm very well versed in that, but just for the people listening, if they're curious on it?

Mayor Salwan: Just email your, uh, council, you know, let your Mayor know. Hey, you know, um, I'm concerned about this or I like to see more of this, like, like you mentioned about the downtown. You know, so everybody has a concern that they care about. And also, um, having a dialogue will kind of let you know, hey, sometimes there's limitations, you know, that they want to do certain things, but because of laws or other things, you know, we we have to work with that. Yeah. For example, some people want no more housing. So it's like, okay, well. I can say that, but realistically, I can't do that because state laws require us to have a certain number of housing. And we don't build the housing, we just have to zone for it, whether somebody builds it or not, that's market driven. But what I can say is that if there is future housing, it will be near the Bart station. So if you're one of those people that doesn't want more housing where you are living, live more so in the suburbs such as Glenmore where there's no Bart stations or there's no Amtrak.

Dakshata Anand (Host): That is so useful. And I think that's the kind of information that they could get from townhouse meetings or from reaching out to their council members.

Mayor Salwan: I'm very accessible, and people always know where I stand. I do town halls. I've done it on CDs. So people message me, people email me. So whatever I do, I try to explain to people what's going on.

Dakshata Anand (Host): Yeah, that's great to hear.

Mayor Salwan: You know, the state more and more is taking away local control because local government has been kind of the barrier for more housing. So if you look at some of these bills that they're passing into the state, um, a lot of them have taken away local control. So for example, like there are certain projects like affordable housing projects, you have to approve them within a certain timeline. Uh, you can't be too restrictive on parking. So those kind of things and and to be honest with you, I think most of the housing, it will probably be in the busy area. So it'll be like, um, you know, the Bart station, you know, which, excuse me, is usually the busier part of town. Um, so. But the thing is, the hope is that these young people, they don't like to drive like you and I, you know, we like to get out there in our car. They want to be driven everywhere. So the hope is 20 years from now, more people will be using Bart, you know, taking a walk more, biking more, that kind of stuff and changing the mode of travel. Um, and what happened in America is that, you know, we stripped away a lot of these main streets. You know, we used to have, like, a village type atmosphere. They removed all the local stores. They put them near the freeway, built these big complexes. And now people have to drive everywhere. Of course. So now we're going back to the roots, where you have a village atmosphere. You've got the grocery store, you've got restaurants, you've got housing, you've got, uh, transportation like New York so that you just have everything there. You can just walk. It's accessible.

Dakshata Anand (Host): 100%. And I think, uh, my best friend actually told me about this. A lot of times you don't realize this, but like you said you're planting trees - when you increase the amount of trees, that's more shade for people to be able to walk to places, right? One of the things in Austin that was really detrimental was there were no trees around, it was flat land and it's so hot. And so you can't really walk in Austin. You have to take a car, which sucked for the youth. And having more trees here and having more accessible plazas would be great just to accommodate for people that want to be more active and have things more accessible to them.

Mayor Salwan: Absolutely, yeah. We're planting trees near all the schools, and we have a lot of seniors now too that hang out in these parks. So now we're like, oh, there's all these seniors eating lunch together, which is great for their mental health. Um, but then now we're planting more trees around where they are. We're looking at benches. How do we can incorporate more places for them to sit? So again, creating that, um, you know, that town square where people can

get together. I'm seeing that when my parents, my grandparents came here, they all felt lonely because there were no other seniors. But now I see all these seniors interacting. I feel good that, hey, you know, they've got a good, good company and good camaraderie.

Dakshata Anand (Host): That's awesome. And just one final question - I know we have to wrap things up on the radio show, but I wanted to ask you, what do you think about the legacy you want to leave as Mayor, and what do you hope people will remember most about your leadership or any message that you want to share on the radio show today?

Mayor Salwan: Well, I hope they think of me as someone who got things done. I think that's pretty much what my brand is. That's what I want to be known as. And, uh, that's probably the most important thing. But for me, it's most important that everybody, you know, has the same experiences that I had. You know, a safe city, good quality life and good schools, great parks, a great place to live in and a great family friendly environment. And everybody felt safe. So I hope that everyone can achieve that. And that's kind of my goal is to, you know, bring people together. The other thing I want to be known for is being a uniter, you know, bringing different groups, different ethnicities, religions, and creating a common environment where everybody feels respected and they embrace the diversity of Fremont.

Dakshata Anand (Host): That is beautiful. And thank you so much for sharing your experiences, your plans, and just reasons behind different initiatives that you're taking as Mayor of Fremont. It was an honor to have you not only on the podcast Learning About Law, but also as the first guest of the radio show series. And yeah, to our listeners who are listening in until now, thank you so much, really appreciate your time, and looking forward to bringing in more notable guests like Mayor Salwan who want to share more about their political or legal aspirations and work that they've done to make the City of Fremont a more informed place.