

Ep.3.22 - Claude Molinari

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SPEAKERS

Announcer, Ed Clemente, Claude Molinari

A Announcer 00:01
Welcome to the Michigan Opportunity, an economic development podcast featuring candid conversations with business leaders across Michigan. You'll hear firsthand accounts from Michigan business leaders and innovators about how the state is driving job growth and business investment, supporting a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem, building vibrant communities and helping to attract and retain one of the most diverse and significant workforces in the nation.

E Ed Clemente 00:29
Hello, I'm Ed Clemente, the host, and I'd like to welcome a friend but I should also mention his name is very well known in the Detroit area in Southeast Michigan, Claude Molinari. Claude's the president and CEO of the Detroit Metro Convention and Visitor's Bureau, also known as, doing businesses as, Visit Detroit. Welcome to the show, Claude.

C Claude Molinari 00:49
Thank you so much for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

E Ed Clemente 00:52
Yeah, and we did get a chance to talk a little bit at Mackinac this year. And I know that that's a busy place for you. But I think this will tie into a little bit, you said you've been using the DBA Visit Detroit now a couple of years now, right?

C Claude Molinari 01:09
That's correct, for two years.

E Ed Clemente 01:11

And was that more probably I would guess it's a marketing thing to it's just easier to say than the other name.

C Claude Molinari 01:18

No doubt, the Detroit Metro Convention and Visitor's Bureau name is a mouthful. And Visit Detroit is two things. Number one, it says who we are. And number two, it says what we do. So it's pretty all-encompassing.

E Ed Clemente 01:32

So what do you say are sort of like, even though we know the business, but what do you tell people? What do you think your main sort of mission is or vision for the organization?

C Claude Molinari 01:45

Our mission and full vision is to bring tourism from around the world to Southeast Michigan. You know, we want to bring people here to employ Southeast Michiganders from Oakland, Wayne and Macomb County and the city of Detroit. And that's really it in a nutshell. We want to fill hotel rooms, our attractions, our event spaces, drive economic impact for the region.

E Ed Clemente 02:12

Yeah, and I was good friends with your predecessor, Larry Alexander and Michael Callahan. Two good guys. I'm sure you worked with a lot. [Great men.] Yeah. But prior to this, you were at the, was it TFC? [It was Cobo Center.] It was Cobo when you started, right?

C Claude Molinari 02:34

That's right. And then TCF center, and now Huntington Place.

E Ed Clemente 02:38

And so you were the manager? And were you always in this industry? Or have you worked for hotels? Or where did you come from originally?

C Claude Molinari 02:47

Yeah. So after university I went right into the entertainment facility management business. So I

year or after university, I went right into the entertainment facility management business. So I transferred from five different cities and I worked at arenas, stadiums and convention centers. And Detroit was my fifth and last stop, and I loved it here so much. I decided to stay.

E

Ed Clemente 03:07

What other cities were you in? That's kind of interesting.

C

Claude Molinari 03:09

So I was in Hartford, New York, New Jersey, Pittsburgh, and Detroit.

E

Ed Clemente 03:15

Wow, you're quite a journeyman. Did you do similar things, though, in each community?

C

Claude Molinari 03:22

Pretty much, again, we always, in my role working for the convention centers, especially, we worked hand in hand with the convention bureau. Because in both circumstances, when I worked at the convention center, who used to say that the only local people I want to see at the building are people that are working there that are getting a check for being there. We want out of town tourists to come in and fill our restaurants or hotel rooms and our convention facilities, because that's what drives economic impact for the region.

E

Ed Clemente 03:53

Yeah, let's talk, too, a little bit about hotels, because I know like I said, we used to work a lot with Larry and Alexander and hotels are pretty critical to this whole equation of everything you're doing. And obviously they're very important financially, obviously, for the region as well.

C

Claude Molinari 04:09

Oh, no doubt, but really, if we have an Achilles heel as a destination, it is our lack of hotel rooms downtown. We have nearly 46,000 hotel rooms in Southeast Michigan, Oakland, Wayne and Macomb County. So we're in very solid shape there. But in the downtown core where we're trying to attract major pieces of convention business. We are critically underserved. Having less than 6,000 hotel rooms downtown puts us at the bottom of our competitive set. And just to give you an idea, if we added 3,000 rooms today, that would still only put us in the middle of our competitive set. Places like Indianapolis and Nashville have triple the amount of hotel rooms downtown and clients are just not interested in bussing their customers to suburban locations. They need to be able to walk to the convention center from the hotels. And so that's why every morning I wake up and every night I go to bed thinking about how I can entice developers to build more hotels in Detroit.

E

Ed Clemente 05:10

Yeah, and I know you've been involved, too, with not only that, but sort of like a mass transit angle from the airport even at times. I know that's a big challenge, too, compared to other regions. But I think compared to Europe, I mean, America is not the best about like, it's a lot easier because Europe is a more condensed region for tourism, say versus America, we're much more spread out.

C

Claude Molinari 05:33

Yeah. So our regional transit is definitely a challenge especially for our local workers. Again, I believe that the statistic is that 50% of the available jobs in Southeast Michigan are not serviced by public transit. And that's very difficult. And when you're talking about workforce development, and trying to get people to take jobs, well, if they can't get there, unless they own a car that really cuts out a whole demographic of people that otherwise would work.

E

Ed Clemente 06:09

And then I would imagine, obviously, with the center downtown, that it's a pretty big center, though. I mean, it's big, relatively like square footage, right?

C

Claude Molinari 06:22

It's the 16th largest convention center in North America. So that just gives you an idea that there's only 15 convention centers larger. And frankly, a lot of times people forget the suburban collection showplace in Novi, that's the 50th largest that space in the country. So when you look at what we have here, as far as facilities, I know sometimes people will discount that, oh, the facility in Novi is small. It's only small in comparison to one of the largest convention centers in the country. It holds its own against, it's one of the top 50 exhibit spaces and the number of events they do there. And the quality of the show, the largest show management company in the world, Informer, does three conventions in the suburban collection showplace just goes to show you how important that venue is also, in putting people to work and filling up hotel rooms and attractions and restaurants.

E

Ed Clemente 07:18

Why don't we just mention some of the sort of bigger things that have either transpired or usually happen every year? I know, I'm a participant of quite a few of them. But what do you see? Like if you start out maybe in a calendar year, what do you? What are the things you guys are planning for every year to do? Well, I know not too long ago, the Grand Prix was here. And I think you're going to talk about that one. But what other big things also come to this area all the time?

C

Claude Molinari 07:44

C Claude Molinari 07:44

Well, sure. Well in February, we hosted the American Bus Association, which is group tour operators who literally are filling motorcoaches for trips all over the United States and Canada. And we hosted that event here. 4,000 group tour operators, they fell in love with the city, they had the greatest time, they're already talking about wanting to come back here. Just recently, in the spring, we hosted Automate, which had 30,000 automation, robotics, data and AI exhibitors. 30,000 people in the city, you couldn't make a right on right or a left turn all week, because the crowds everywhere were blocking up the streets, which is a great problem for us to have.

E Ed Clemente 08:32

And I would imagine that also is good because of the sort of sector we're in a little bit the mobility sector, and how that does play into why they kind of pick this area, I would guess, too, right?

C Claude Molinari 08:45

Oh, no doubt, no doubt. This show was in Chicago for 20 years. And it has been in Detroit for the last two. And it's done spectacularly here. The attendance has grown immensely. The exhibit space has grown, and the show has taken off. And I do believe that that has a great deal to do with the fact that they brought it to Detroit and frankly, that's legitimized our of our destination. When I'm talking and our salespeople are talking to show managers and association managers from around the country and around the world, frankly, we tell them, Hey, bring your show to Detroit because you know it will grow and it's going to do spectacularly well for you.

E Ed Clemente 09:29

Any other I know Movement's obvious. We bring in international delegations, and they're so excited to go to the Movement Festival as well.

C Claude Molinari 09:37

We had a two week run of the Movement Festival, which is just a sensational event, brings in over 100,000 people - huge economic impact. The convention center basically has the Memorial Day weekend off every year because the way movement fills up every hotel room with international guests, we couldn't book anything else in the city. And that's a great thing. And then the week after that was the Grand Prix, which did incredible, incredible numbers. We had the Association of Iron & Steel Technology, which was also a massive event with over 10,000 attendees. And then right in the middle of all that we had the Asian Pacific Economic Cooperative, which was held in Detroit. First time it was held in the United States in 30 years. And we welcome ministers from 21 Pacific Rim economies like Japan, South Korea, Canada, Australia, and they came to Detroit, that's where they chose. That's where the president and the U.S. State Department decided it would be a great place to host this meeting.

E

Ed Clemente 10:46

Yeah, actually, I was involved with that with a smaller meeting, but with Global Ties Detroit, which you're familiar with, but we hosted something and we met the head people and they just were really surprised which I think a lot of people that come from the East Coast or West Coast for the first time are usually surprised by not only just Detroit, but just Michigan in general. They've really never, they hear about it, but it's not usually on their radar all the time. But I think you're making a lot of big radar hits now.

C

Claude Molinari 11:15

Well, we are very much looking to familiarize people with our destination. We have a saying at Visit Detroit, we say if we can get them here, we'll get them here. So often, we hear things like I'm so shocked. I'm so surprised, I had no idea, I hadn't considered Detroit, or I hadn't considered Novi or Southfield or Troy. There's just so many things that are just really changing the perception and the narrative. And we're being very diligent, specifically hosting association events where we bring in meeting planners. Last summer we had Connect Partnership that brought in 1,200 meeting planners from all over the world to have a convention here in Detroit, and they were exposed to the city. 90% of the people that were attendees had never been here before and had never hosted an event here before. This summer, we're hosting CESS, which is a scientific partnership of association managers, again, 75 association executives who are decision makers who decide where their association is going to hold their convention. 50% of them have never been to Detroit before. Next summer, we're going to host PCMA, which is the Professional Conference Meeting Association, their summer EduCon event or education convention, again, introducing people to us, seeing our airport, seeing our roads, seeing our hotels, our attractions, our restaurants, our hotels, our convention centers, our arenas and stadiums. They're always blown away. And they're always like I'm so glad because I had no idea how amazing this place was.

E

Ed Clemente 12:55

Well, we get that quite a bit like I said, again, with the Global Ties Detroit group is that people, usually we're not on the radar for international people. Because usually people want to go to New York or Orlando or LA or something or Vegas, you know, but then, when they do come here, almost all of them become ambassadors of how much they enjoyed their experience. And we're sort of underplaying a couple of things but one is the Detroit Riverfront being one of the more walkable riverfronts, it is waterfronts in the country now?

C

Claude Molinari 13:27

In the last three years, the readers of USA Today newspaper have chosen the Detroit Riverfront as the number one riverwalk in the whole United States. I was just recently in San Antonio, and they have a pretty decent riverwalk, and I was speaking to a group of German press people and tour operators. And I said, I'm sure glad that we're enjoying San Antonio here at this convention and the riverwalk, but you know, this is not even the first best riverwalk in the country. Detroit has the number one riverwalk in the country and they're all laughing and I said it's true, there it is and there's the pictures behind me of it. So we're definitely highlighting so many amazing

things in the best part about our riverfront and I have to hand it to Mark Wallace and Matt Cullen of the Detroit Riverfront Conservancy and all the philanthropic people. It's the number one riverwalk in the country, and we have another half a billion dollars of development taking place right now. So it's already the best and it's gonna get a lot better.

A Announcer 14:35

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E Ed Clemente 14:50

I'm going to switch gears a little bit but let's talk a little bit too about sports. First of all, I know the USFL, it's a new addition. We haven't had that in a long time. And I'm sure they were playing I believe at Ford Field right this year?

C Claude Molinari 15:06

Correct. And we're hosting also, they've got a strange, not a strange, but an interesting collaboration of things where all the teams used to play out of Birmingham, and now they spread some of them out. And so, in Detroit at Ford Field, we're hosting, of course, our own Michigan Panthers. And for at least one year, we're hosting the Philadelphia Stars, too. So there's a lot of doubleheader games. But the USFL does incredible television numbers. And we want to make it a great, affordable thing for Southeast Michiganders to come to and participate and enjoy football because it seems these days in sports, there's two seasons, there's NFL football season, and then there's NFL offseason, everything revolves around that sport, and it's very exciting. So having the USFL, I thought they did a great job this season. And and we're looking forward to several more years of this growing league becoming a staple in Southeast Michigan.

E Ed Clemente 16:05

So speaking of football, let's talk a little bit about the NFL Draft. And what does that really mean? Because you know more about the numbers probably than anybody here in the city. So why don't you tell us what that means?

C Claude Molinari 16:17

Well, the NFL Draft is, I think, first and foremost, the fact that the National Football League chose Detroit I think speaks very highly of our destination as a global marketplace for this league to put this together, I think was really great for our city and our region and our state for sure. The week of April 25-27th, that's going to be incredible, all eyes in the sports world will be focused on Detroit. And the best part about it is it's a free event. So we anticipate somewhere in the neighborhood of half a million people from all over the country and Canada, and really all

over the world coming in to join Detroit and really having a spectacular time. [Half a million?] Yes, easily half a million. Again, in Nashville, they did half a million people. One of the things, we were just in Kansas City where they did almost 400,000 people, but there was not one NFL city that was in a reasonable driving distance of Kansas City. You know, when we consider that to be four hours, we have Pittsburgh, Buffalo, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Indianapolis and Chicago, all less than [And Toronto.] and Toronto, but those are all NFL cities all within a four hour distance. And they can easily make it here. And we anticipate that they're going to be coming big time because they'll be able to drive here, stay in our hotels and we anticipate we're going to fill up every hotel room in the three counties plus, Ohio, Canada, Washtenaw County, Genesee County, they'll be filling up hotel rooms in Ann Arbor for this event.

E

Ed Clemente 18:11

And when is it? When is that going to be, in which month roughly?

C

Claude Molinari 18:14

So that's April 25, 26th and 27th of 2024. [Getting close.] Yes, we put a countdown clock up when we announced that we won the draft and it had 700 days on it. And I pass that clock at least once a day. It's in downtown Detroit at the Esplanade in front of Campus Martius and when it got to 365 I was like oh boy, we better get ready and now we're at somewhere around 300 and something so we're getting very close.

E

Ed Clemente 18:44

Yeah you know, I know we don't have time to talk about everything but like even concerts I know this summer like Taylor Swift was here sold out a ton of season tickets and or not season tickets, but tons of people went to it. Huge crowds. I mean, I couldn't believe how many people, she's not exactly who I go watch all the time. But she got huge turnouts for this concert which was at Ford Field I believe.

C

Claude Molinari 19:08

She's an incredible cult of personality and to fill up an entire football stadium two different nights and then have the outside of the stadium filled. There were 1,000 people waiting on the day before the event for merchandise to open. 1,000 people waited overnight. But you know Detroit is one of the music capitals of the world. We fill up Ford Field for Taylor Swift and pop music and The Rolling Stones and Ed Sheeran and Beyonce but also Luke Combs and Morgan Wallen, also selling multiple sold out full stadium events for Ford Field, and then you know, Madonna and Pink and I mean and even Barry Manilow at Little Caesars arena, we have boxing. I mean, only London, England and New York City, New York have more theater seats than Detroit. And we support that as a destination in an incredible way.

E

Ed Clemente 20:07

That's a fascinating fact. I never really think about it. And you know, I grew up in an era where

That's a fascinating fact. I never really think about it. And you know, I grew up in an era where only Tiger Stadium and the Red Wings were downtown. But now with all four major sports playing in the area, that's a big deal for fans, too, because there's hot nights, where someone's walking to the opera or walk into a Tiger game, walk into a concert, it's kind of like a good buzz to it when it's happening.

C Claude Molinari 20:34

Oh, the city is jamming. And you think about like, there's no other city in North America, all the world that has four major sports teams all playing in downtown stadiums right next to each other. It's four teams, within three blocks, but we also have the Fisher Theatre, the Fox Theater, the Fillmore, the Masonic Temple, the Opera House, the Music Hall. I mean, it's incredible the amount of things and they're all happening, and they're all filling up. And it's constantly a downtown that's buzzing.

E Ed Clemente 21:07

And, I should have mentioned this while you're talking about sports, but are you like a referee?

C Claude Molinari 21:17

Yes, I've been a part time, my side hustle since I was 13 years old was ice hockey referee. So I don't get to do it. As much as I used to, I'll be honest, this job keeps me very busy. But I do love to get out there every once in a while and referee these games.

E Ed Clemente 21:36

That's great. I didn't know that. So you you stayed a lot. I presume that if you keep in shape for those, because you've got to be in as good a shape as any of the players when you arrive.

C Claude Molinari 21:46

You're out there. I will say there's some times when I'm the sole referee having to manage the whole ice rink that I'll look for a quick whistle somewhere so I can catch a breath.

E Ed Clemente 21:58

I won't tell anyone. Speaking of young kids here for just a second. But you know, you're in this industry. And I'm sure it's a path you might not have chosen to be in, but maybe you did. But what would you give your sort of 17-year-old self? What would you tell people to go into, after all the experiences you've had now?

C Claude Molinari 22:19

CLAUDE MOLINARI 24:25

Well, this is an amazing career. And I think a lot of times people think about like tourism, hospitality. And they only imagine it's the front desk clerk at a hotel. Or it's washing dishes or serving dishes, and those are quality employments, I'm not trying to put them down in any way. Those are jobs with honor. But there's so much like, if you're in finance, like there's director of finances and CFOs, who are making outstanding livings in the hospitality industry. There's event management and show managers and lawyers and all different types of disciplines within the realm. I mean, we have seven different departments within Visit Detroit, between sales and marketing, and finance, and events, services. So there's all different types of career opportunities. And what I love about it the most is that it's very different all the time. You know, sometimes I'm managing with conventions, sometimes it's sporting events, sometimes it's theater events, it can be government meetings, I was blessed when I was in Pittsburgh, we hosted the G20 Summit, where all the world leaders were there. And to be a part of such an amazing, momentous event. It was life-changing. And so you're part of history with these things, and you have a real say, and you manage challenges, because we always say the next perfect show will be the first one, always things go wrong. You always have to react and adapt. And if you take on that mindset that we're going to fix it no matter what, you pretty much get things go your way.

E

Ed Clemente 24:06

I grew up in a restaurant and every night was a different night because you can never predict one night from the next how things in crowd flow is and food and all those things. They're all sort of big variables. But that's what actually made it more exciting working in a restaurant, too, is you never had the same night twice. So your last question. Pretty simple one, but maybe a hard one. What do you like best about living in Michigan?

C

Claude Molinari 24:31

Oh, the pure blue water. The excitement of things. Our primary residence is in Northville. But we have an apartment in downtown Detroit, where I'm actually talking to you from today. And I love the juxtaposition that there's so many different things going on. We have attractions, we have sports, we have theater, we have everything and it's commutable. I grew up in New York City and when I visit home if I want to, my mom lives one mile closer to Yankee Stadium than I live from Comerica Park. And in order to get there, I could leave the house and in 25 minutes I can be downtown, it would take two hours to get to Yankee Stadium for one mile closer. I mean, we have an amazing quality of life here. And frankly, I also feel that the laws here in Michigan, of inclusion, and protection of everybody to be their authentic self makes us a great place to live. And, again, as a transplant, I'm not an original Michigander, but I have adopted this city, this region, this state as my home, this is where my family lives where my now adult children live and love it. And I'm just so proud to be here.

E

Ed Clemente 25:52

Well, we're glad you're in the position you're at, and you definitely have enough enthusiasm. And I know you're gonna have a lot of big things on your plate coming up. But keep up the great work, Claude and thanks again for making Detroit and south metro Detroit and putting us on the map.



Claude Molinari 26:09

tEd, thank you so much. It was a pleasure speaking with you today.



Ed Clemente 26:12

Join us next week. Our guest will be Jeff Lambert. He's the chairman of Lambert and he's got some interesting new projects he's getting involved with.



Announcer 26:21

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