

Ep.13 -Marty Fittante of InvestIUP

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SPEAKERS

Announcer, Ed Clemente, Marty Fittante

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- 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 00:28

Welcome to the Michigan Opportunity brought to you by the Michigan Economic Development Corporation. Hello, my name is Ed Clemente. I'm your host today for the show. And today I'm fortunate to have Marty Fittante he's the Chief Executive Officer for Invest UP. Welcome to the show, Marty.
 - M** Marty Fittante 00:45

Thanks so much Ed for having me.
 - E** Ed Clemente 00:47

Well, it's a it's it's always a pleasure to have anyone from the UP. I think I told you a long

time ago, I used to have property up there. And I used to spend a lot of time up there myself.

M Marty Fittante 00:58

Well, we'll see if we can get you some citizenship by virtue of that.

E Ed Clemente 01:01

Well, yes, I need a passport. I know, but the Visa rules. So I want to just first of all say to people that this is a kind of a newer organization, right? When you say it's about three years old, I think that's what you mentioned to me.

M Marty Fittante 01:15

That's exactly right. So we actually launched November of 2017. So approaching our fourth year.

E Ed Clemente 01:22

Kind of how did it come up? I know that you're one of the masterminds, but I didn't know how the project started. How did you guys manage to unite the up like that.

M Marty Fittante 01:32

So some businessmen and business women came together, boy, starting in late 2016 or so, really wanted to move the economy, the Upper Peninsula forward, felt that parochialism stood in our way in some respects. And so, at the end of the day, they saw some success that some regional models like The Right Place were having I know you had Birgit on and really, he's kind of the gold standard, from my perspective, the New North a little bit closer to home, in what they do in Northeast Wisconsin. And so they really felt that a regional economic development organization can help kind of fill some of the void that was existing in the Upper Peninsula.

E Ed Clemente 02:10

And I'm sure you've got great partners, I know that usually always recommend people at least mentioned their, their chairperson of the board. That's always a good way to start. But if there's anyone else you want to highlight, please take the time to do so.

M

Marty Fittante 02:25

Thanks. We are blessed not only from an investor perspective in commitments that the private sector and three public universities in the Upper Peninsula have made to us. My Board Chairman Bob Mahaney of Veridea is one of the more dynamic individuals in the Upper Peninsula really was the impetus behind the organization. And so he's been at the helm since its inception, and really appreciate the guidance and leadership that he and really the entire board have offered to us. And then additionally, when you talk partners, I really need to mention the local partners, or local economic development organizations all across the Upper Peninsula really are integral to any success that we would have as an organization, we rely upon them at the end of the day, we really try to be a resource for them. They're the local experts, they know their communities. And so when you have a territory as big as the Upper Peninsula is, and it's bigger than nine states, the only way we're going to have success regionally is in partnership with our local partners.

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Ed Clemente 03:27

And not to be competitive, but it's not bigger than the Lower Peninsula, as we've been learned, but it's pretty close. It's how many hours to go from one end to the other end, roughly.

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Marty Fittante 03:37

It's not bigger, but better. And so take a look for that from my good friends down. Yeah, you're you're spanning you know, five to six hours, depending on how you drive to get from one side of the peninsula to the other.

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Ed Clemente 03:56

And in fact, you actually have an area code. I used to do hearings, in Escanaba, for when I was at Liquor Control. And that was a different time zone, wasn't it? Or people would show up later for the meetings because they had our differences. I said sometimes

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Marty Fittante 04:10

Yeah, that's exactly right. Four of our counties are in Central Time. I live in Central Time. So oftentimes, you Eastern Time Zone folks don't take into account some of the sensitivities of needing to get on the road even an hour earlier here. So we're pretty, you know, proud of that area code. Unfortunately, now, we have to use the area code a little more regularly because of a recent change that was made. So but the 906 is, you know,

certainly indicative of the Upper Peninsula.

E

Ed Clemente 04:40

Oh, yeah. I seen a lot of T shirts with 906 on the so why don't you mention at least the three universities. I think that's pretty interesting, because I know the MEDC and you work pretty closely, I'm sure with the MEDC, but I'm sure you're partners with them as well. So you want to mention some of your partnerships with that way?

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Marty Fittante 04:59

Sure. So, you know, the MEDC has been a great partner to us. And you know, as we're a new organization, certainly look to them for resource help. And they've, they've been there time and again, and really appreciate the leadership that we've seen, through both staff level and management level, they're so grateful for the commitment that they've made to try to ensure our success. And then we are unique in that we have a relationship with our three universities, you know, as a rural region, we're really blessed to have Lake State University, Northern Michigan University and Michigan Tech University, not only for the commitment that they've made to us, but the commitment that they make to the region. And they're really great ambassadors for, I think the types of opportunities that we can move forward in the Upper Peninsula.

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Ed Clemente 05:46

And, you know, I know that you've probably driving around, it's got to be tough for you, because you got to visit the whole region, you know, yourself. But I would imagine that, you know, is there any sort of unique companies up there? I know you do a lot, obviously, it's beautiful, but I would imagine you also have a lot of agribusiness activities that would also support some of the things you're you're involved with, right?

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Marty Fittante 06:13

So you know, certainly, distance is a challenge for us. I'm a road warrior had the good fortune of working on staff in the legislature before this position and commuted from Iron Mountain to to Lansing, that's about a six hour one way drive. And so I really thought I would be behind the wheel before the pandemic anyway, a little bit less. That hasn't proved that didn't prove to be true, just really kind of changed the dynamics of the drive, just because of the the geography of the Upper Peninsula. But you're right, there's a lot of unique employers that certainly it's fun to get in and hear their story and see what they're doing. We still, to some degree, rely on extractive industries Ed, I think from our

perspective, sustainability, and being good stewards is not inconsistent with extractive industries. So you look at what we do on the forest product side. And on the mining side, really instrumental to what our economy looks like in many respects. But yet, those companies really take their obligation to the environment very seriously. And I would point to the Eagle Mine up in Marquette, a good partner for us, an investor in this organization is really a role model in terms of how you can mine responsibly, strategically and sustainably. And when that mine was originally conceived, it was understandably very contentious. But I think through their transparency, and they've now come to live that out a billion dollars of investment later into the community. They've shown that indeed, there there can be harmony between that industry and the environment.

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Ed Clemente 07:53

Yeah, corporate neighbors are always great assets, I used to run a Chamber of Commerce and we worked hand in glove with them a lot of times for creating waterfront along the Detroit River, as there was former brownfield sites, and I'm sure you have the same challenges. But at the same time, there are opportunities to right, I don't know everything up there, but I'm sure you've got some projects where you flipped them around just because of some of these partnerships, I would guess.

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Marty Fittante 08:18

Yeah, that's exactly right. And you look at kind of where we're going in terms of electrification and mobility, and the copper reserves that we have up here. Boy, there's, there's opportunity for us to be self determining with regard to kind of our own fate. So, you know, we think that there's opportunity yet ahead of us, as you look at kind of where we're going culturally, including with regard to forest products, you know, we've digitization has certainly taken a hit on the paper industry, but now as we're talking about cross-laminated timber and replacing some of that structural steel, or replacing plastic with, with new cardboard technology that allows you to package water in cardboard boxes, as opposed to plastics. There's, I think, really a good synergy in a we're excited in terms of the opportunity that those types of things present.

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Ed Clemente 09:09

Yeah, and obviously, on the biodegradable, recyclable side, it's way better a lot of times than plastic has been historically. I know that you guys also because of your, you know, is it is it hard. I know with more and more people, it seems like working from a distance. seems like that be an advantage for you. I know that Marquette especially I know a lot of people have moved up there. So is that playing out for you guys? Where do you still have

some talent issues?

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Marty Fittante 09:37

So talents is the number one issue we have there's just no question about it. And, you know, it's quickly risen back to the top issue in front of us with the pandemic. There were certainly stresses that came with it in the early months but very quickly, talent rose back to be the top challenge in front of us, but I think you're spot on from our perspective, Ed remote work is a real opportunity and one we're looking to take advantage of anecdotally we see that playing itself out. We know time and again, as it's been expressed to us that people have looked to quality of life now, with the new opportunity that's afforded to them. And for that reason, we think the Wall Street Journal got it right about six weeks ago when it headlined a story about where the opportunity for remote work lies and in that it specifically mentioned Michigan's Upper Peninsula because of the quality of life and the amenities that come with it. So we think they're spot on.

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Ed Clemente 10:34

Yeah, and it's it's an a very affordable place too, as I know I've been up there a lot. And, by the way, to two unusual things that are more recent is, I'm sure you're involved a little bit with maybe the some of the Starlink project, you know, as you're starting to bring that in, but also, you have two airports up there, I don't think a lot of people realize where that's a lot of opportunity as well, like former Air Force bases, I should say.

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Marty Fittante 10:57

We do with two former Air Force bases, you're right, we have actually six airports. So regional airport in Marquette that really is a focal point for us, we really believe that building out regional air service brings a business class with it. So there's certainly some infrastructure and assets that again, compared to other rural regions, we're very fortunate to have,

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Ed Clemente 11:18

Buit the starlink, I know that you guys are trying to do some aerospace too aren't you up there?

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Marty Fittante 11:23

So yeah, so that's a good point. You know, with regard to what's going on with regard to

Starlink, and broadband, we see kind of the connectivity to all of that. So recently, the Michigan Association of Aerospace, the Manufacturers Association, had designated the Marquette area as a launch site. And then KI, excuse me, over in Chippewa County, they were actually selected to be the command center. So when you talk about what's next with Starlink, and the proliferation of satellites, we see this as another opportunity. And I look forward to kind of see what MAMA, then next presents with regard to launching both of those facilities.

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Ed Clemente 12:05

Is there any other industries you're focusing on beyond the ones you've already mentioned, I know you've probably got a big variety up there. So I don't know is there one you want to highlight some?

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Marty Fittante 12:15

We do, I mean, you know, so at the end of the day, small business is really the hallmark of Upper Peninsula economy. And I think roughly 90% of the employers in the Upper Peninsula employ less than 50 people. And so that's part of the reason that the stresses of the pandemic were so concerning. But we've got a real robust medical device manufacturing segment, manufacturing itself, advanced manufacturing, it's a big part of what we do. Dickinson Delta in Menominee counties, look at some of the pretty unique manufacturers that we have in that space. And then you look at some of the Department of Defense stuff that's going on all across the Upper Peninsula, 33 companies in the aerospace business, big part of that housed over in Houghton in the Keweenaw, because of Michigan Tech, and, you know, world class research institution that exists there. So, my board Ed consists of companies that do business in 11 different industry sectors, so not only across the Upper Peninsula in the state, but nationally, and they employ some, some percent of the UP workforce to give you some perspective there. So really all important sectors from from our perspective,

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Announcer 13:24

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E

Ed Clemente 13:40

So, you know, just as a little opportunity for you, but if you were sort of, say you were

talking to some high school kids, and you had a chance to do a little commencement speech, because you want to bring talent up there, what kind of what would you recommend people who might want to think about living up there? What kind of fields maybe should they be getting into, that you predict will be growing opportunities? Because you said you have shortages?

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Marty Fittante 14:05

Yeah. So there's no question from our perspective that cyber is an opportunity for us, you know, with the ability to do so much of that work remotely. We were really blessed in the midst of the pandemic to actually land, a tech company, a cyber company in Northcross Consulting Group out of Portland, Maine. So part of their concern was talent. And so they reached a memorandum of understanding with NMU to give them the assurance that the talent that they need would be forthcoming. And so they've now cited themselves in Marquette. It's their third location, nationally. And so with that, and with the Cyber Institute as part of Northern and what Michigan Tech is doing on that front, and to some degree Lake State, we really believe that cyber is an opportunity for us.

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Ed Clemente 14:57

You know, you're triggered a question I didn't prepare for, but I'm sure you can give me 30 seconds about what's going on with the Soo Locks. Because I think that projects very exciting.

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Marty Fittante 15:08

It is. And you know, you consider how important that is as critical infrastructure, it's, it's really important that we get the locks rebuilt, and in a good place to ensure commerce can continue. I saw this statistic and unfortunately don't remember it but in terms of how much of the country's commerce is dependent upon the Soo Locks, so undergoing a major renovation, really grateful to our federal delegation, to to get that money committed, the state has been working towards that for some period of time. But really grateful that that's now moving forward.

E

Ed Clemente 15:44

Yeah, no, I'm excited to get up and starting to see some of that going on. And just, I didn't I should have touched on this a little bit, but we don't know each other directly from the past. But I know we sort of overlapped at the legislature. So you've had quite a bit of a background in Lansing, and did you work federally too, I forgot,

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Marty Fittante 16:04

I did not. So a number of my team, Amy Bergland so grateful to have her on board comes out of staff with Carl Levin. And so she brings just a wealth of federal knowledge with her in relationships by virtue of that. This is the third iteration of my career. So I practiced law for 12 years and then went to be on staff in the legislature for 14 a couple different roles, but principally was Senator Tom Caspersen. It was it was truly an honor to serve the house in the Senate District alongside of Senator Caspersen. And always will look back on that time with real fondness. It was an opportunity to make a difference for an area that we both called home and we're so passionate about.

E

Ed Clemente 16:47

Yeah, Tom is a great guy did serve with him myself for a brief overlap it when he was in the senate as well. And the couple were just on to sort of the last couple questions, it goes fast as they told you on and it's in so many things I want to talk about that are sort of more Pure Michigan things so I'm restraining myself for all the different great things you have up there. But you also, um, you know, I know that you're there's a something I think it's at Michigan Tech, but it's with the Great Lakes. It's a research center is my can you just just do a quick 30 seconds about that? Because I think that's pretty interesting, what they're doing with like autonomous vessels and things like that.

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Marty Fittante 17:30

Yeah, that's right. So you know, part of what they're doing is exactly with autonomous water-based vessels. It's been instrumental in trying to ensure the integrity of Line 5. And so it's really, I think, another growth area for us is the state's talking about mobility. Michigan Tech's really been working kind of in this particular sector to advance that type of technology. And so to see it and see it in such an important context, is it's been really I think, something we're proud of in the Upper Peninsula.

E

Ed Clemente 18:03

So the last questions are hardest is always. Where's your favorite spot? Again, and I'm going to be shocked if you don't say anywhere up in the UP, but or maybe it's a secret spot you don't want to tell people where you go fishing? I don't know. But what do you what do you love best? Maybe it could be an event or anything, you know, what do you like best about Michigan?

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Marty Fittante 18:22

Oh, gosh, I would just say the Upper Peninsula. I don't want to pick favorites within the 906. And so I don't think you can go wrong anywhere. As you get across the Mackinac Bridge. There's so much. You know, that's just spectacular about the Upper Peninsula. 1700 miles of great lake shoreline 300 waterfalls, 4300 inland lakes, so it's pretty hard to choose.

E

Ed Clemente 18:47

And not only that, we already have an ambassador in the Lower Peninsula from there. Tom Izzo, I know he's born somewhere, I think, is it Ironwood or Iron Mountain Iron Mountain? Right?

M

Marty Fittante 18:57

Yeah. So that's right. And so his childhood homes about a mile from from where I live, and both he and Steve Steve Mariucci are just great ambassadors for the Upper Peninsula. And, you know, I think at the end of the day, what I so appreciated about Tom Casperson, they reflect every day and that's just humility. So, you know, hard working, passionate and just humble.

E

Ed Clemente 19:20

Yeah, no, I love to UP people. I want to thank you very much again, Marty for taking time today to be with us again. It's Marty Fittante. He's the Chief Executive Officer for Invest UP. Thanks for taking time to do this and good luck with all your new projects.

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Marty Fittante 19:36

Thanks Ed so much for having me again and again, my thanks to the MEDC for the continued partnership with us in the Upper Peninsula.

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Announcer 19:44

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