

Ep.3.37 - Jon Kramer

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SPEAKERS

Jon Kramer, Ed Clemente, Announcer

- A** Announcer 00:02
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 your host, Ed Clemente. And we're fortunate today to have Jon Kramer on, he's the president and CEO of OHM Advisors. Welcome to the show, Jon.
- J** Jon Kramer 00:39
Thank you. Glad to be here and appreciate you having me on.
- E** Ed Clemente 00:42
Yeah, I've known of OHM for a long time. And it's not like I think the general public does too much. But why don't you kind of tell people what OHM does?
- J** Jon Kramer 00:55
Sure. And it's funny you ask that because sometimes if I'm at a wedding, and I'm trying to tell someone what OHM does or what I do, and I want to run away from them, I'll tell them that I design stuff, or we design stuff. But if I'm really trying to talk about what OHM, does, I tell them

that we are the community advancement firm. And that means that we are a diverse, mission-driven team that really works collaboratively across multiple service areas, which include architecture and engineering and planning and urban design. You name it, landscape, architecture, surveying, construction engineering, and we create better places for people to live and work. And we really like to think of ourselves as an industry leader when it comes to innovation. Because everything we do is rooted in the need to help communities solve problems.

E

Ed Clemente 01:50

Well as someone who has a degree in public administration, I know intimately all the stuff that goes on and I've been like a city manager, I've served on DDA. People, I don't think, have any idea how intricate that relationship is for public service and what firms like yours do. And how that interdependency is really how cities evolve, like you say and advance, right? [Absolutely. Absolutely.] And so, you're a pretty big outfit. Why don't you mention how many people work there and how many states you're in, too?

J

Jon Kramer 02:25

Sure. Well, you know, I started here, gosh, 30 years ago, as an intern, I was 19 years old. And back then we had about 80 people. But today, we have just under 700 people. And when I started, we were working in one office. And today we're working in 18 offices across five states here in the Midwest. And a little secret, although I won't say where yet, we're going to open a 19th office here later on in the fall. And I think that speaks to one of the reasons I'm here and why I stayed here for 30 years is the opportunity that was afforded to me. I don't know that I would have stuck around with the firm. If we didn't grow if there wasn't that continual opportunity. You know, I had a degree in civil and environmental engineering. But when I was hired, we didn't even have an environmental engineering group. So I joined the municipal engineering group. What's neat today is I can say we've grown an environmental engineering group that has about 50 people on it. So I love seeing that kind of thing. But it's really neat to see the growth.

E

Ed Clemente 03:29

Yeah, speaking of environmental, I know you guys try to work with quite a few communities and water improvement, and how to turn that into like an advantage actually, to process things like that, haven't you been? I was looking at your website. And I couldn't remember the exact name of the project. But I know it's in some community.

J

Jon Kramer 03:48

Sure, yeah. I mean, we design what I call the hard infrastructure and the soft infrastructure. But you're talking specifically to the environmental. So for instance, we recently did a project, it's called the Ford Cove: Shoreline and Coastal Wetland Restoration. And that was a really neat job. There was a waterfront Ford estate that had an old seawall and rather than replacing it with concrete, we used a lot of native plants and were able to build live things out in the actual

water, that is really helping clear up the water quality and increase the fish population. So we do a little bit of everything. And everyone knows is roads and bridges, and those are absolutely important. But sometimes it's the environmental or maybe there's certain things I call that soft infrastructure where people like to eat on the rooftops or dine on the sidewalks, and that's all part of what we do through our planning aspect or architecture.

E

Ed Clemente 04:54

I was on planning committees for cities before, but I think it's probably one of the more interesting things in a community like planning and zoning sometimes, but every person who lives in a city wants their city to be X or whatever. But the planning commission is where that stuff happens usually, right?

J

Jon Kramer 05:19

Yeah, the planning commission is on the front end of what's going to happen in a community, you have a city manager or a mayor, they're making decisions, you have the citizens that want what they want. But the planning commission is helping shape that, and they're seeing what development may or may not come long before the public normally sees that. So that's a very critical role. I actually had the opportunity to serve on planning commission about 20 years ago, and it was quite a neat experience. Sometimes it's a pain and sometimes it's political. And sometimes it can get a little bit interesting with the public. But what better thing you can do then to help create your community and make it what the people want?

E

Ed Clemente 06:08

Yeah, and obviously, I know you reached out to me originally about what you guys did at Roosevelt Park, and why don't you sort of give a story about that? Because I think that part of Detroit is one of the most interesting parts of Detroit right now.

J

Jon Kramer 06:24

Absolutely. And I think maybe a lot of the listeners are familiar with the 100 year old train station, Michigan Central that's there. And obviously, Ford Motor Company and others are putting \$750 million, so a lot of dollars, into rehabbing that building and bringing jobs to that building. But the part that we were involved in is right out front called Roosevelt Park and the park's been there forever. But if you think back 100 years, we were interested in getting from point A to point B, and we were interested in motor vehicle traffic and moving it. And today, what we know is the residents and the people, they are really the ones that - they matter. So a shout out to certainly Mayor Duggans administration, they had us reach out to the neighborhoods, the neighborhoods of Southwest Detroit and Corktown. And we reached out to them said, What do you want in this park? What would make it neat? What would make it special? And that park is really, it's a front porch to that whole Michigan Central Station, right? It's what you see as you come up to it. And they said we want shade for hot days, they've got swinging benches. We really changed it. But again, 50 years ago, 100 years ago, maybe the engineers sort of decided what people needed. And I'm not going to compare ourselves to

Apple, where they're going to tell you what you need in an iPhone, that's good, that works for them. What we find when you're designing this type of infrastructure is you need to know what the people want and need. And then we need to make it great and make it safe for them.

E

Ed Clemente 07:55

Yeah, and I remember, for many years how rough that park was actually. And I mean, I spent a lot of time going back in the old days to the Tiger games, but you know, it was a parking lot almost, people were parking their cars there on the grass or whatever was left to the grass. And it's beautiful now and so were you approached by Ford or is that a city park? I didn't know.

J

Jon Kramer 08:20

It's a city park. And we worked in conjunction with the city on it and to your point, and I've been out there several times since it's been completed. I'm watching people take selfies of themselves. I'm watching, they had the food truck out there. They had Irish step dancers, there was a lot of stuff going on. There were young kids, there were older people. People were really walking and interested, you know, what's going on here? What is this? And I'm excited about its future. I'm sure they'll do all kinds of great programming there.

E

Ed Clemente 08:49

Yeah, I look at the park like Beacon Park, which I'd never even knew existed and how much that has changed that part of Detroit. And, it's tied in I think more with DTE but I would assume similar projects would be associated with Roosevelt Park going forward, right?

J

Jon Kramer 09:07

Absolutely. I mean, when you start investing in a community, more and more investment tends to start to come. We did a job, Riopelle Streetscape and Eastern Market. You know, we did East Warren-Cadieux. And again, a lot of these are more of that combination of what I call the hard infrastructure and the soft infrastructure. The hard infrastructure being the road is decrepit, needs to be repaved. Maybe the water mains 100 years old, maybe it's actually made out of wood or something crazy. And so we go in and we replace that but before we button it up up top, we asked the businesses and we asked the residents What do you want here? Would you eat on a sidewalk? Would you rather have two lanes? Three lanes? Do you need bike lanes? Would allow for different things to happen and increase their quality of life because you can kind of take that holistic picture, get the feedback from the public and then we try to put together a great product for them.

E

Ed Clemente 10:01

And that ties back into our original point about the planning. Because there's nothing worse than putting in something where probably somebody thought it was going to be something else, and they want to put a road in there make that a parking lot or something like that. And

that's why you need to have zoning and planning. And I know it's not like the general public is excited about it. But I think it's the most critical thing for Detroit, who has so much open land and so many opportunities that you got to get it right, while you're at the beginning of the compass heading here.

J Jon Kramer 10:33

Absolutely, you gotta get it right, too. And sometimes I mentioned we go get all that input from the public. But when we're looking at something, we're going to still make sure that we're doing an economic analysis. So sometimes there is pie in the sky, and you can build it. But if you build something that's so expensive, that people may want it, but it's not going to draw or it's not going to improve the economy around the area. It may not make sense to do it, you want something that the people want, and it's going to have that economic impact. So we make sure we look at that.

A Announcer 11:04

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E Ed Clemente 11:19

A little bit more macro picture, but I assume you have multiple offices in Michigan, if you have 18, right.

J Jon Kramer 11:29

Yeah, we have about 11 offices in Michigan.

E Ed Clemente 11:32

So what other projects have you done around the state too?

J Jon Kramer 11:35

Sure, well, we've done everything. You know, we've worked on the Blue Water Bridge, I think we have even a slice of the Gordie Howe Bridge. We're working on things up in the Upper Peninsula, we worked on improving the prisons in Upper Peninsula, we've worked on the roads, the water, the sewer. We've worked in what we call the university region, like in Ann Arbor for instance, we did a Smart Park and Ride design, which a lot of people know those commuter lots are kind of nice, and you're seeing them pop up along the freeways. And they actually do get a

lot of use, but there, we actually tied it in with the AATA. So now you can have a bus coming in, picking up a commuter that's parking their car in the lot. And these things really get a lot of use. So we love to see that type of thing happening.

E

Ed Clemente 12:25

What does OHM stand for by the way? I don't even know.

J

Jon Kramer 12:29

Sure. A lot of design firms, it has to do with the history. So OHM stands for Orchard, Hiltz and McCliment. Those are three previous presidents of the firm. And the name has carried on but our branding has told us to go with OHM. Because people don't like to say all the names.

E

Ed Clemente 12:47

Yeah, well, I should mention, I do know John Hiltz, your predecessor, I believe. [Absolutely.] He's still on your board or something.

J

Jon Kramer 12:56

He is on our board. He is chairman of the board. And he has taken us to great heights and I am honored to continue to take the torch from him and keep it moving.

E

Ed Clemente 13:05

And I think I'd be a little remiss if we didn't plug a couple other people I know that weren't there in the past, but we know Elmo, whose real name I'm trying to remember.

J

Jon Kramer 13:15

Evan Bradley, absolutely. Washtenaw County Bank Commissioner.

E

Ed Clemente 13:21

Yeah, he's a big shot and he used to work for you guys. And also Pat Wingate, who now runs what office for you guys?

J

Jon Kramer 13:30

He's actually up in the Petosky region. [Lucky him.] So maybe he's smarter than us. He knows the where the turquoise waters and the sand dunes and the chocolate and all that good stuff

up in our northwest corner of the state. So he moved there a couple years ago after working in Livonia for 25 years or so. Yep.

E Ed Clemente 13:48

I should mention those last two and including you, a little bit, all were rugby players at U of M two.

J Jon Kramer 13:55

That's true. Although I should clarify, I played lacrosse at U of M and I was asked to participate in one of the matches. So I have played on the rugby field with those guys. And we'll just say I was fast, but not necessarily big.

E Ed Clemente 14:13

I know it's just a good group and you obviously you got your civil engineering degree from U of M then?

J Jon Kramer 14:20

Yep. Civil and environmental. Correct.

E Ed Clemente 14:22

Oh, great, great. And so what other big partners you work with? I don't know if you work with, I know you've mentioned cities, but anyone else you want to highlight?

J Jon Kramer 14:30

Well, a couple of thoughts here. I mean, one, I'll call it more of a partnership, ACEC Michigan, which is the American Council of Engineering Companies, which is kind of the business voice of America and Michigan's design and service industry. And oh, I guess by the way, I'm the president of ACEC Michigan for this year. They only let you be president for one year, but they do a lot of great work and really looking at infrastructure funding. And Governor Whitmer actually has created a growth council, which is something that's important to Michigan. And we're happy to have ACEC representation on that council. Because when you look at how can we attract people to the state? How can we keep people in the state, we know that we need good roads, we need good bridges, we need safe drinking water, everyone expects that. And then back to that soft infrastructure that I talked about. If you're in a community and you want to be able to dine on the sidewalks till midnight in your community, and you want to attract cool businesses, you're gonna have to look at that end of things. And that takes that planning and what we call urban planning and landscape architecture to build these beautiful communities. So I certainly appreciate our role with ACEC Michigan. But yeah, a city, whether

it's city of Ann Arbor, City of Farmington Hills or City of Detroit or up in the up the City of Hancock or Petosky or Midland, those counties, whether it's Wayne County or Oakland County or Washtenaw County, we work with the counties and we help them make their communities a better place. Yeah, I probably should have told you but my first job out of college, I worked for Paid, Hurt & Bogue. I don't even think they exist anymore. I know the names. Yeah.

E

Ed Clemente 16:27

My first job out of college, I was a sewer inspector. So we were doing a separation of the sanitary and storm sewers. I was there on behalf of the engineer to make sure they're following specs. So that was my brief interaction.

J

Jon Kramer 16:42

Sure, sewer separations. Those are big, important jobs. And it sounds like if you are inspecting the sewers, when we did hire the interns, and it was told you're getting paid to watch dirty videos, because you were watching the inside pipe.

E

Ed Clemente 16:59

Yeah, it was, it was a good gig for a summer job. It's funny after that I got a job working for a state senator, right after that job. And because of that background, we had like pretty rural communities and part of our district, I was in charge of every sewer project, open drain, flooding, you name it, those became mine, just from this one internship, I became an expert in all those other fields, at least at the legislative level.

J

Jon Kramer 17:32

Well, after the podcast, we're gonna look at whether we can put you to work here.

E

Ed Clemente 17:35

Yeah, no, I know, I should be looking for a new gig. The other thing too is you mentioned architecture, too. I see that a little bit about architecture. Are you building buildings? Or do you just design them, and then someone else constructs?



17:50

Yeah, we're doing the design. And we may design things like a hotel, or a theater or a city hall. And we try to make sure again, back to that advancing communities, that we're gonna be helping design something that the community really views as a gem, something that is very important to them their image and their growth. But absolutely, we have all kinds of beautiful projects that we've designed over the years.

E Ed Clemente 18:18

And you've already hit on this question a little bit. But if there's anything else about future trends you see in your field that you think people should pay attention to?

J Jon Kramer 18:29

Three things really come to mind for me. One is AI. The second would be what I'll call the workforce or the firm of the future. And the third is some innovative funding that we are going to need as a state or we're going to be in trouble. So I could go into depth on any of those if you want me to.

E Ed Clemente 18:48

No, no, no, I understand how each of them could apply whether it's in architecture or anything else. So this question is a little harder. Where'd you go to high school again? I forgot.

J Jon Kramer 18:58

High school, I actually went to Ann Arbor-Huron. I was what they call a River Rat.

E Ed Clemente 19:04

My old roommate was a River Rat. So you grew up and you went to U of M? That's interesting. A lot of people don't, usually they go somewhere else.

J Jon Kramer 19:13

Yeah, it's three miles away from my house, but it felt like it was three hours away. My parents left me alone.

E Ed Clemente 19:19

So what would you tell your 17 year old self? Would you recommend a different field? What would you tell yourself?

J Jon Kramer 19:27

A lot of the things are kind of cliché. I mean, follow your heart, follow your talent. And the one thing I would tell people is don't follow the money within reason. So if your love and your talent can't really make you enough money to have a house and buy food, then you may need to consider things different but the engineering field worked out well for me, but there was 10 or

15 different kinds of engineering I had to choose from and had I gone with the one that might have paid the most at the time. I don't think I would have been happy I went to civil engineering, because I liked seeing things get built. And I love seeing projects get built. But I was good at chemical engineering. And I talked to one of my friends that had a chemical engineering job. And I think that's great for people. But I remember them telling me their job was to figure out the 47 different shades of what color a pickup truck was, and make the color, and I feel like that's great for someone. But that's not something that could make me passionate 30 years later. So follow that passion, like what you do, do it well. I mean, you hear that a lot. But just make sure that you have something that you're going to be able to make enough money at that you're gonna be able to live the life that you want to live.

E

Ed Clemente 20:39

You just explained my life. I never made a ton of money. But I've always been very happy with whatever job I have. This job here is really great. I love the MEDC and it's a great place to work. The last question is, do you have a favorite spot in Michigan, or favorite event you guys like to take your family?

J

Jon Kramer 20:57

Well, I mean, I am an outdoors person at heart. And I love all seasons. And I love the water. So I'm one of those guys that if there's water I'm jumping in and that goes for all four seasons. So I've been known to jump in the water in January if there's not ice on the lake, as well as July and August. So if you've got a lake that needs jumping into give me a call, and I'll jump in it.

E

Ed Clemente 21:22

We have that in common with our podcast producer Otie McKinley, he does a Polar Plunge every year. [Oh, yep, been there.] Well, anyway, thanks again. Our guest again was Jon Kramer. He's the president and CEO of OHM Advisors. Thanks again, Jon, for taking time to do this and keep up the good work and keep expanding and keep doing like you're making Michigan and everywhere you guys have offices now. Keep up the work.

J

Jon Kramer 21:46

Absolutely. Thanks. It's been a pleasure to be here and I appreciate the MEDC given me the microphone for a few minutes.

E

Ed Clemente 21:53

Make sure you join us next week where I guess it's going to be Roberto Nicholas. He's the Mexican Consul here in Detroit for the state of Michigan as well as northern Ohio.

A

Announcer 22:03



ANNOUNCER 22.03

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