

Ep.2.40 - Amy O'Leary

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SPEAKERS

Announcer, Ed Clemente, Amy O'Leary

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 your host today Ed Clemente, and we're fortunate to have Amy O'Leary, she is the Executive Director for SEMCOG and the President of the Metropolitan Affairs Coalition. And I think both of those titles you and I know, the general public doesn't know, but I think you're going to try to break it down for us a little bit. And welcome to the show, Amy.

A Amy O'Leary 00:50

Hi, Ed, thanks for having me today. Sure, I can break it down a little bit for you. So SEMCOG is the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments and we are an association of local governments. We have 178 cities, villages, townships and counties and community colleges that choose to be members of SEMCOG. MAC is the Metropolitan Affairs Coalition, which you mentioned, I'm the President of MAC as well, and that's really a public private partnership, dedicated to really improving the quality of life and promoting regional cooperation in Southeast Michigan.

E Ed Clemente 01:29

And I should mention, we had Naheed Huq on a while back and she talked more about SEMCOG

things, just letting the audience know, today, we're going to be focusing more on MAC issues, but I think the, you can still give maybe 30 seconds or so what you think people should know about SEMCOG because I don't think a lot of people know what the organization, I mean, I served on your board for a long time, on the Executive Committee, so I don't think the general public knows it that well.

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Amy O'Leary 01:59

Okay, great. Yes, SEMCOG is the regional planning agency for Southeast Michigan, so the seven counties around metropolitan Detroit. We do long range planning in the areas of transportation, community economic development, environment, and education. We worked in those topic areas, as well as being that membership organization that I mentioned earlier.

E

Ed Clemente 02:23

And like I said, before I was back then, in the old days, I was the Chair of, they had an Economic Development Committee back then and I was the chair there for like, three years in a row. I don't know if no one else wanted to do it, but I just did it. And there was a lot of people, we had a good group, but a lot of people I still keep in touch with. And SEMCOG to me was like one of the best organizations I was on as a board just because there's so many commonalities that, you know, it's like, it's like any convention, you go t. The convention, the you know, the the actual stuff people are gonna listen to is one thing, but all the networking that goes on at SEMCOG, I think is one of its greatest values, too

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Amy O'Leary 03:04

Right, it's definitely one of our strengths is being able to bring those local communities together to have those kinds of conversations and learn from each other and network with each other.

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Ed Clemente 03:16

And let's talk a little bit now about MAC, the Metropolitan Affairs Coalition. And you, it surprised me the other day when we had our pre-call, that you said, it's pretty old, actually, when did it start again?

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Amy O'Leary 03:29

Great. So MAC started in 1958 and it was really initiated by individuals such as Henry Ford II and Walter Reuthor. And it really was the organization that helped fund an initiative called the Committee of 100 that met and formed SEMCOG. That was one of the things that MAC, so MAC was before SEMCOG actually existed. And they've been involved in a lot of things over the years, but early on, so back in SEMCOG was formed in '68, they had a big part of that, like I mentioned, but in 1967, they were a part of providing research and development for creating

our first regional public transportation authority, which is now known as Smart. So they've been influential and really important in evolving really important issues and topics in Southeast Michigan for over 50 years.

E

Ed Clemente 04:30

Well, I used to teach Michigan high school history, and people really need to know that first thing you said, Henry Ford II and Walter Reuther. Walter Reuther and Henry Ford's dad or grandpa did not get along at all. And, and I think that is that really says a lot about how what a great start this was to build this organization, which I'm sure that same sort of, you know, mentality is still with the organization to this day. And why don't you mention a little bit of the makeup of board or executive committee, those kinds of things.

A

Amy O'Leary 05:02

Sure. I mean, that's really the inspiring thing of back then and like you said, it's still true today, is that it brings together leaders from government, business, labor and education, to really provide perspectives and tackle really pressing issues that we have in our region. And it's a very engaged board, as you mentioned, and the dialogue is nonpartisan solution oriented. And you can imagine having those kinds of representatives at this table. You have some very interesting conversation, but the nice thing is, is it brings out a lot of the issues that need to be talked about, by you know, not just having one sector trying to come up with the solutions by themselves.

E

Ed Clemente 05:49

Yeah, because it's pretty normal for people to stay in their own silos most of the time, you know. I ran a chamber of commerce before. I mean, you know, it's, it's easy just to get a group think when you just have business people, you know, and versus, say, public sector, folks, because I was elected, obviously, as well. And I just know that that dialogue, especially in today's world, is probably more important than it's ever been, at least in my lifetime.

A

Amy O'Leary 06:16

Right, absolutely. And that's, I think, the local governments, but also the business and labor and education, board members, they really cherish that that's what MAC is about. And so they protect that as a part of what we're trying to do by being nonpartisan and really being solution focused.

E

Ed Clemente 06:36

I used to be involved with a leadership program, and it was downriver, but one guy used to always give the same example. He said, anytime you've got a leadership board of different people, it's like a big dance, and you get a chance to go up into the balcony and watch the

dance better. So it's almost like you're taking a timeout, because you have a bunch of people you can trust, where you can talk about issues that you usually can't talk with those people in a regular basis, right?

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Amy O'Leary 07:05

Right, that's very true. And you mentioned some of our board composition. And we are run by an executive committee, but we have three co-chairs representing the various sectors. So Beth Ardisana from ASG Renaissance, who you've interviewed before, and is very involved in a lot of boards all over Michigan and the country, she is a co chair and the business side. Congresswoman Debbie Dingell is on the government side. And David Hecker, from the American Federation of Teachers is on the labor side.

E

Ed Clemente 07:41

Yeah, and I know, and I'm gonna just tell people that they should go to your website, Metropolitan Affairs Coalition, but you should really look at that board, it's very impressive. I'm impressed whenever I read all the names of the different organizations, because you have a big board too, isn't it like, I don't know how many people.

A

Amy O'Leary 07:58

Right, it is a big board and a couple of other examples that, you know, they've been really helpful to us, not just on the MAC side, but a lot of times, it's our opportunity to hear other voices on the SECOG side. So for example, Domenico Grasso is the Chancellor of U of M Dearborn and he's on the board. And he's able to provide his education, higher education expertise to us in a lot of different avenues that we're involved in. Sandra DiNello, President and CEO of Flagstar Bank. He was the co-chair of our Economic Development Strategy, when we just updated it. He represented the business side as part of updating that strategy. We have Nancy Susick, she's the COO of Beaumont Health Systems, and that's really good, it provides the health perspective and a lot of different areas while we're going through the COVID pandemic. But also just looking at issues like ensuring health is reflected in work that we do, whether it's in parks, the aging issues, and then also, of course, telehealth.

A

Announcer 09:10

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E

Ed Clemente 09:26

I wanted to mention a couple things real quick is that I did serve on the taskforce with the economic development one, and it was so well done, and I think the thing that was best, weirdly, about it was I started going to it before COVID. And then you had a pivot but I think

they still came up with a really great end product that's still available on your website, right, about economic development.

A

Amy O'Leary 09:49

Right, well, thank you that was quite an experience because like you said we had formed a task force and you know, we had a traditional way of running task forces that would meet in person and have these really good conversations. And we had to, as you said, pivot to first being able to restart it after, you know, we needed some time for people to kind of settle through what was happening with COVID. But after about three or four months, we got the taskforce back together remotely, and that was new for a lot of us back then to run a taskforce remotely. But we also decided to, you know, look at, what are the key themes that we are including in this and looking at the lens of both health and equity when it comes to our strategy work. So that was a whole new kind of overarching theme that we included throughout that strategy, which came about, largely after we had initiated that first taskforce meeting in person.

E

Ed Clemente 10:50

Yeah, and I think the whole idea of regional organizations is such a bigger challenge than say, if it's like one community that might have a little taskforce or something like that but because you have seven counties, and so many, you know, it's got to be over 5 million people, I'm guessing maybe more. [Yep, just about.] Yeah, and so, you know, that's so many moving parts. So to try to come up with any sort of conclusions is, is pretty daunting at times and that's why it's even more important that you have those conversations, because I know you guys, when I, I was on because I was a Trustee for Wayne County Community College originally, I was elected. So I served more with the education folks, but when I left your board when I became a State Rep, and you were just starting to do a lot of the waterfront. And I know, I thought MAC was very involved and so was SEMCOG, of the way we have the Detroit River now, for example. I know you guys are very involved with a lot of that, we have and if it wasn't for you guys today.

A

Amy O'Leary 11:52

Yeah, that was one of our early initiatives, probably 20 plus years ago, was looking at the Detroit River waterfront and the reuse of it, and how MAC as this institution could really help move that forward. And it really had a big, a big role to play in the early days of, you know, restoration of the waterfront. So yes, that was one of our earlier projects, probably 20 years ago now.

E

Ed Clemente 12:20

And it's still going on, I mean, the Wilson project, and there's so many other things still going on, they just opened up the, like, a Dequindre Cut thing, where it's even growing. And there's some other sort of greenways you're looking at doing and I know a lot of that filtered through you guys.

A

Amy O'Leary 12:36

Yeah, and that's a great part of whether it's MAC and SEMCOG is all of the partnerships, you know, there may be things where MAC initiates or is involved in at one point and or SEMCOG, and then others come and kind of take on and carry it forward. And that's a great thing for us, you know, to be able to help initiate conversations, but the real implementers get in there and take it over and you can't ask for anything more really.

E

Ed Clemente 13:06

Yeah, I always thought as SEMCOG too and MAC as more like a compass directions almost too that other people, you know, you still needed everybody else to sort of do the building blocks, but at least you're kind of going for a common goal sort of, you know, that was created.

A

Amy O'Leary 13:23

Yeah, and like I said, I think that's one of the things people like about SEMCOG and MAC is you can kind of step away from your everyday role and responsibility and think a little bit broader about the region as a whole and, and what you're trying to achieve as a region and get behind that.

E

Ed Clemente 13:41

You're, and I didn't really, we didn't talk about it, but did you grew up in Southeast Michigan? I don't know everything about you.

A

Amy O'Leary 13:47

I did, I did. I was born and raised in Southeast Michigan, actually, in Macomb County. I grew up as part of a family that came over and worked on farms and so I have a farming kind of heritage and background. And that was my first job, when I was in sixth grade, was working on a farm. So we so I've been in Macomb County a lot of years and then moved around the region, but have always been there. I did go to Alma College, which I'm sure you're familiar with. And I did my undergraduate degree at Alma, and then I went back to school once I started at SEMCOG in '90, so I've been at SEMCOG since 1994 and went back and received my Planning degree from Eastern Michigan.

E

Ed Clemente 14:42

And also you and I have one thing, I don't know if you did it the same way, but I was a Taubman Fellow at Harvard. I saw you have it on your resume as well.

A

Amy O'Leary 14:55

Oh excellent, yes. So yes, that was a couple years ago. It was in, I think I went in 2019, so right

Oh excellent, yes. So yes, that was a couple years ago. It was in, I think I went in 2019, so right before the pandemic. We have a program, we're lucky enough that the Taubman Foundation does sponsor two elected officials every year to go to the Harvard Kennedy School. And it was my opportunity to be able to go and represent SEMCOG to be able to really understand what it was like to go through that program. So I did go through that program in 2019. And it was, it was quite an experience, that's for sure.

E

Ed Clemente 15:36

Yeah, it actually prompted me to get my Master's in Organizational Leadership, because of one of the instructors that was there, I based my thesis off of one of the presentations, actually. [Really?] Oh, yeah, I still use tons of information from it. I still got all the binders.

A

Amy O'Leary 15:54

Right, so well, I think one of the things I learned the most was a greater appreciation for a SEMCOG and MAC, because what they showed you, I think, in Harvard was, you know, you have people of many different interests and many different opinions. But that if you really want to get something done, you've got to be able to see the common ground and figure out how to work together and collaborate. And I think they spend a fair amount of time at Harvard trying to, in some ways, pit you against each other a little bit to be able to show those differences. But then at the end of the program, they bring it back together again and show how, yeah, but you can have these differences. If you work together, look at all that you can accomplish. And I think that's what SEMCOG and MAC are all about, really.

E

Ed Clemente 16:41

Sometime you and I'll have a conversation about my side stories. It was, it was an interesting experience for me. Um, but let's, let's get back. Let's talk a little bit about where you think the future is, some trends or any other, like partners or stakeholders you wanted to mention as well?

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Amy O'Leary 17:00

Sure, that would be great. One of the initiatives that we've been working on most recently is one of our more recent board members, recent meeting, he came back to the board is Ambassador John Rakolta from Walbridge. He was on the board for years, and he was actually a co-chair of the board, but then when he became a US Ambassador, he left the board, obviously, but now he's back. And one of the things that he brought back to us was making sure that Michigan was going to be ready in the mobility sector the way that we needed to be. And what could MAC bring to the table as this, one of the only entities that we know of, that brings together all these different groups to have those conversations about, you know, maintaining our dominance in the mobility industry as we transition. So through John bringing that up, which has been really helpful, and the board, as I said, I've got a very engaged board and they right away, jumped on that and said, yes, we need to be involved in that conversation. We've brought together partners like Glenn Stevens, who I know has been on your podcast, from MICHAuto and Maureen Krause from the Detroit Regional Partnership. But also, also Quentin

Messer from MEDC has been involved, to just have those conversations about who is doing what in the mobility space? And how can we be transparent with what's going on? And what role can MAC serve SEMCOG serve, to help make sure that we move this forward? Because as you know, we're very dependent on the auto industry in Southeast Michigan, and we're six and a half times more dependent on the auto industry than the national average. So it's really important to us, and we think MAC can have a role.

E

Ed Clemente 18:57

Yeah, in fact, all those people you mentioned were all former guests on the show, including Trevor Pawl, who does a lot with the MEDC, and that mobility space and electrification and all. And but you know, it's it's very interesting, how much it keeps evolving to and quickly. And, you know, it's almost got sort of global political issues attached to it too, sometimes, of how fast we can move and that's why it's good the Ambassador's involved on this one. He's a guest we might have on someday. The so, is there any other things you wanted to bring up in case I, got a couple more questions for you?

A

Amy O'Leary 19:39

Well, when you talk about what are the future trends or projects, I mean, when we talk about business, labor, education, and government, all are really impacted by the labor shortage that we're having right now. So we have been spending some time on that and serving the public and really better understanding what are the barriers for entry into the workforce, so that the MAC board and other organizations can look at that research and help move forward with addressing some of those barriers. So some of the results that we've seen are things like those that are not searching for work, we asked them and they said childcare responsibilities was the top reason. Some of them were in process of obtaining a certificate or degree, so they weren't ready yet to move up into a different job. Or they're getting more experience, they're still getting their education, but there was a percent that said mental health challenges and really waiting for the COVID uncertainties to pass as well. So those were some of the barriers that we heard. Some of the other findings, though that I thought was, you know, pretty interesting, and I think there's an opportunity for us to, you know, spread the word on what we're hearing about that, is that things like respondent awareness of the Michigan Works! program was about 40%, while 27%, were familiar with the Michigan Talent Connect program. And then we asked them, if you knew about it, how many would use it, and it said, about half of those familiar with these organizations use them or would use them to facilitate their job search. So most of the people that are looking for jobs are using the traditional, Indeed, and job search kinds of mechanisms like that. So we do think there's an opportunity there to connect the great work that's happening by Michigan Works! and others with some of these other ways that people are using to seek jobs.

E

Ed Clemente 21:46

Yeah, all right and the last couple of questions is, I ask this of every guest, but if you could go back now that you just talked about talent, actually in jobs, what would you what advice would you give your 17 year old self before you went to Alma?

A

Amy O'Leary 22:04

Sure, I would say that you don't have to have everything figured out. I think, in this time, there's more appreciation for lifelong learning and evolving your career. But growing up both where I grew up, you know, in the history of my family, which is in the auto industry, and my dad worked in the auto industry for 40 years. My brother has worked in the same job for almost 30 years, my sister has been a teacher for 28 years, and I've been here for 28 years. There's something to be said about the generations of knowing that it's okay to evolve your career. And you don't always have to have it figured out when you're 18 or 19 or 21 years old, you know, which I think is a lot of pressure on kids nowadays to try and have it all figured out.

E

Ed Clemente 22:59

I must have heard your advice, because I've had a lot of jobs. Trust me I still get people asking me what I want to be when I grow up. But yeah, that's a good answer. And the last question is, obviously, you're a Michigan resident, do you have a favorite either event or place you'd like to go to in Michigan?

A

Amy O'Leary 23:22

Well, I would say anywhere where there's water. It could be the Great Lakes, it could be a smaller lake and stream, if there's a trail even better, so I could go hiking. And then I'm going to answer with another one. I really enjoy both walking around the city of Detroit where we're headquartered, but also I really enjoy small towns and checking out what's new and interesting in the small towns around Southeast Michigan.

E

Ed Clemente 23:49

Your offices, are they by Campus Martius? I forgot where they are. [Yes, yes.] Okay. Yeah, no trails are great. I think, you know, actually, I think Michigan has probably within an hour drive of downtown Detroit, probably about 30 different good hiking trails. You know, it's it's kind of nice that we can go pretty close and still be in urban area. [Yes, absolutely.] Yeah. Well, the other thing, is that your last question? And so once again, I want to thank Amy O'Leary, she's Executive Director of SEMCOG and President of the Metropolitan Affairs Coalition. You did a great job today Amy and thanks again for taking time to do this. I know you've got a really busy schedule.

A

Amy O'Leary 24:27

All right. Well, thank you so much for the opportunity. It was great.

E

Ed Clemente 24:30

It was a lot of fun. Thank you. Join us next week, we're going to have two guests, Doug Del Grosso and Ronald Hall. Doug is the President and CEO of Adient and Ron is the President and

CEO of Bridgewater Interiors, both automotive suppliers.



Announcer 24:30

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