

Ep.2.41 - Nathan Ohle-1

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SPEAKERS

Announcer, Ed Clemente, Nathan Ohle

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, Ed Clemente and today we're very fortunate to have Nathan Ohle, he's the, give me your official title, but I know you're the President, CEO, Executive Director, I know you've gotten a lot of different things here, because you've worked your way up to the ranks. Where do you go by right now Nathan?

N Nathan Ohle 00:45

I'm the President, CEO of the International Economic Development Council.

E Ed Clemente 00:48

And on top of that, you know, it's something that you and I, but our CEO, Quenton knows what it is. But I'm sure you go to a lot of functions probably in Washington, DC, where you're based, right? What do you tell people kind of the short answer when someone asks what you do.

N Nathan Ohle 01:10

So what I say is the International Economic Development Council is the world's largest membership association for economic developers. So we provide professional development opportunities, both for individuals and organizations to further their own career and, and better understand and get more trained in economic development. We are hosting conferences and bringing people together around important topics. We do policy and advocacy here in DC, and sometimes at the state level. And then we're also doing thought leadership, we're pushing for new ideas, new innovative approaches to economic development to help further the field.

E

Ed Clemente 01:40

You know, and just because the show is sort of about economic development, futurism and things like that, what do you kind of tell people economic development is because I've, I've worked on it and many different levels, state and nationally, but what do you kind of tell people what it is, is your short definition?

N

Nathan Ohle 01:58

To me, economic development, the heart of economic development, is really centered around people and communities. Economic developers are the conveners in communities that bring business that bring government that bring nonprofits together to talk about and create opportunities for growth in those communities. And it's really about providing good paying jobs, a good quality of life in communities and regions, and bringing people together to raise the interest of those communities and provide good opportunities for families to live and thrive.

E

Ed Clemente 02:30

Yeah, I remember when I used to run a chamber of commerce, we always use the short definition of something like, it's the balance between economic development and quality of life. And so that, you know, you need people to want to live in your community, but you also make sure you some jobs to provide them. And we also used to use a little bit of a definition between sort of wealth creation and wealth churning, where some companies make the wealth so other companies can sort of work off of that sort of foundation, right?

N

Nathan Ohle 03:03

Yeah, to me, it all starts at the community level, and the businesses are certainly a huge part of that, right. They help to build community within not only their own realm, but also in the way that they give back to communities, engage in those communities. And you know, from a community standpoint, it starts with those that are that are located in their community, and obviously those that might come into the community, and how do they create opportunities for not just businesses to thrive, but for the community in the region itself to benefit from that?

E

Ed Clemente 03:31

Yeah, and even your definition you just gave me of the balance between public sector, private

sector, nonprofits, NGOs, even higher education, right, they all have a part into it, and the economic development sort of ecosystem, it's easy for us to sort of know what it is. But it's kind of like the blind guys describing the elephant, you. And sometimes people get stuck in their own silos as their parts of the most important, but it's such a real mix, and balance of all those different sectors that really make it work.

N

Nathan Ohle 04:04

Well, it's different in each community, right? Because if you're in a rural community or urban community, or even urban to urban or rural to rural, there's going to be differences in the way that your community approaches economic development based on your own assets and opportunities that exist in those communities. So you know, there are lots of ways to think about this, but you can't get in a silo, especially the last three years, we've seen, the interconnectedness between infrastructure conversations, and economic development and housing are all intertwined. And they're, they're coming closer together. And we've got to be willing to not just invite people to our own tables, but to show up at other people's tables and those conversations as well.

E

Ed Clemente 04:38

Yeah, and it's, it's, I'm going to get to your background in a few minutes, but I want to stay on this topic just for a little bit. Because I know you call yourselves International, you know, and that's the that's the key to me, I think a pretty important component. Because, you know, even with America, our style of economic development is very different than and other parts in the world. And everything, depending on the type of government, you know, like a parliament might do it very differently, you know, than we do here. But how do you describe sort of the uniqueness of American economic development? And then maybe a little bit how you guys sort of lead that discussion with international folks, because they know you've hosted quite a few organizations that you have as partners as well, right?

N

Nathan Ohle 05:24

Yeah, so we have members that are international and partners that are international in scope and focus, and obviously, location. We were represented by more than 20 countries across several continents through our membership. But then we also build partnerships with other economic development associations, whether it's in Europe, or in Africa, or in South America, or Asia, or Australia, and New Zealand. We want to build partnerships and provide tools and resources that can be tailored to the needs of those regions of the world. Because we know economic development is fundamentally different here in United States than it might be in Africa, or might be in Australia. But there are tools and resources that can really can be applicable across those regions. And so the key there is to provide those in a way that can be tailored to the needs of those communities, those regions, those countries themselves. In the United States, we are very focused, obviously on business, especially business retention, those businesses that are already here. And economic development is focused on small business growth in many ways. 46% of jobs here in the United States are driven through small businesses. That looks and feels a little bit differently in different countries, different continents across the world. And so we want to make sure that not only do we not take the approach of

here's how it works everywhere, but really understand where are the nuances that we can create opportunity, create some tools and resources that others can use? And how do we bring others into these conversations so that we better understand what works in in the EU? Or what works in in Asia? And what are the tools and resources they might need that we might be able to provide? But also what can we learn from them as well? And how do we share those resources, share those learnings across not just our membership, but across the economic development field.

E

Ed Clemente 07:03

Yeah, and not to get too high level, I don't want to scare away any listeners. But I mean, every country sort of you know, translates Adam Smith, and different economist, and how that affects capitalism differently too, because obviously, France might be much more involved in sort of assisting agriculture, something more than we are maybe in the US. So when we, no matter what happens, you hear, you know, in the headlines and everything, globalism is not going to change, people are still going to need stuff. There's too much of an ecosystem globally now that we do in America have to figure out how do we adjust to how other countries do things? You know, you got the, you know, the Trans-Pacific Partnership thing. I mean, you've got all these alliances. And I would imagine that makes your job much more challenging as you try to help out. I think you said you had like 5000 members or something?

N

Nathan Ohle 07:59

Yeah. 5000 members across the world. And you're right, there are absolutely challenges to how do you provide resources, thought leadership and ideas to those members about what works or what, what might not work, because the nuances are so different across the world. But the beauty of what we've been able to achieve is not only those partnerships with those other associations across the world that are doing this work that help us with the with the cross learning, but we also have opportunities for those members, whether from Australia or Canada or from the EU, to come into our conferences, to our webinars, to give their own perspective and really teach and learn from others. And so it gives an opportunity not just for us to learn and teach, but it also gives others an opportunity to do the same thing.

E

Ed Clemente 08:43

Yeah, there's nothing like a sort of the always evolving education process of economic development. I always told people you know, every year it's a different story of what's going to be the most valuable thing that a company might be looking for. And if you don't have the full toolkit, you won't know what that is. And you could easily miss, you know, great opportunity sometimes.

N

Nathan Ohle 09:04

Well, and the other the other the other really important aspect of economic development here when we're talking about businesses in particular, is how do we make sure that when businesses come in to start making investments that those investments stay in the

community? How do they circulate and really embed in those communities to benefit the community themselves, and ensure that it is not just a one way relationship. Economic development has become much more about the connectedness between business and community as opposed to one versus the other?

A

Announcer 09:30

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E

Ed Clemente 09:46

Let's get a little bit about you though. You know, you're not just the guy that's running the IEDC. Now you're also got a lot of Michigan roots. You grew up in Midland, you said right? [Yep.] And but then you do you what was your first, I know you got two degrees from Michigan State, right?

N

Nathan Ohle 10:05

Yeah. So I got a degree in Business Management and then right headed into my senior year at Michigan State I took on a secondary called Family Human Services. Very similar to social work, actually not a degree offered by Michigan State anymore. But as a part of that, you're required to get an internship. And I had done the typical kind of family program. And I've done grant writing and been successful in there. And so I went to my advisor and said, Hey, I want to take a different approach. I want to take a policy approach and understand how policy affects the programs on the ground. I was lucky enough at the time to find an internship and then Governor Granholm's office now Secretary Granholm and was lucky enough as a part of that internship then to have an opportunity to work for her once I graduated. And I spent about two and a half years with her, traveling across the state with her and rural and urban communities across across Michigan. And then I had the opportunity to actually come over to MEDC. I spent almost five years at the MEDC running three different economic development boards for the state, right in the heart of the recession. So in many ways, both the worst and best time to be doing economic development. The worst is self explanatory because hemorrhaging jobs and supply chain was really, really critically endangered at that point in time, but also the best because we had to be innovative and think differently about economic development. And so, you know, it was definitely in the trenches, five years of doing that work with a lot of the folks that are still there at the MEDC, but it was also one of the best experiences of my life.

E

Ed Clemente 11:26

Yeah, I think that's where you and I overlap somewhat, I was in the legislature at the time. And I know a lot of the packages I worked on, were during that really dark ages of like, from 2007 to 2010. And we were really open to things but as you said, you know, like, it's like almost like trying to do inductive versus deductive reasoning, you had to come up with something, and you didn't know what was going to stick and what would be, you know, what would be attractive.

And we should also mention that the Secretary Granholm's, Secretary of Energy, and so that she now is very involved with many different projects across the world actually in that position. And I'm glad to see you guys probably still keep in touch. I presume.

N Nathan Ohle 12:11

We do. Absolutely. No, she's she's great. She's always had a focus on jobs and job creation, whether it was as Governor or now as Secretary of Energy. So she has been a huge, huge, huge proponent, supporter of economic development throughout her own career.

E Ed Clemente 12:25

Yeah, she was really sharp working with her. I remember in my committee, she approached me and several different packages of bills before we actually rolled them out. She would say, are you interested in this, those kinds of things and worked out through the MEDC, and we should mention too you, you kind of went through fast that you were at the MEDC, but you also worked on, I think you worked for three boards or four boards, I forgot.

N Nathan Ohle 12:47

Yes, I ran the MSF Board, the Michigan Strategic Fund, which is still still around, I ran the MEGA Board, which was more your typical incentive programs, and then a board called the SEIC Board, which is much more kind of University Economic Development focus, but we also did a business plan competitions and some really unique things around trying to drive venture capital. So it was really, really interesting and fun time to be doing economic development of state and obviously learned a lot of those lessons that still apply today.

E Ed Clemente 13:13

Yeah, I would imagine that last board, you mentioned was more like tech transfer kind of things where they were trying to implement projects from like students or research into private sector kind of?

N Nathan Ohle 13:23

Yeah, it had a pretty wide scope of work. Certainly we were working very closely with the universities. We had several university presidents that sat on that board. We also had, you know, some venture capitalists that sat on that board, we had some private business, folks, and some government folks. It was a really unique contribution across that board.

E Ed Clemente 13:40

Yeah, I'm sure that all those things come in handy when you're in the position you're in now, I would guess, too. Something will pop up and go, oh yeah, I worked on that before. Three weird

things, though, maybe not weird, but you're also like, head of fitness. You're a radio host and something with the Pistons.

N

Nathan Ohle 14:00

So I mean, I did a lot of stuff in the state of Michigan. So when I finished the MEDC, I moved over to an organization called the Michigan Fitness Foundation. It's a nonprofit that still exists that runs a lot of the nutrition and physical activity programs across the state, based in Lansing. I ran a podcast while I was there, and then back in college, I worked for the Pistons, I interned for the Pistons, and in fact, was set to go work out for the St. Louis Rams, who were then in St. Louis. And now are in LA, when I got the offer to work for the Governor's Office, so I turned them down. But the experience they have with the Pistons is right at the heart of of their crown as 2004 the year year before they won the NBA title, but you know, it was it was a great time to be there.

E

Ed Clemente 14:42

That was when Rasheed was on the team, right?

N

Nathan Ohle 14:44

Rashid was there, they drafted Darko that year while I was there.

E

Ed Clemente 14:48

Haha! The biggest mistake in drafting history. That was the same year LeBron and who was Dwayne Wade I think, all came out and I think Durant too maybe, they all came out the same year. That's crazy that happened. Well, sorry. Let's let's get a little bit more to your ties with Michigan a little bit. But you have at least from my count, I went through your board, you have at least four board members that have Michigan ties. I think Quentin obviously, who we've mentioned you're friends with. I think I'm trying to remember who, I think Maureen Krauss, right?

N

Nathan Ohle 15:25

Yup, so Maureen Krauss from Detroit is on our Board. Joanne Crary is a former Chair of the IEDC from Saginaw Future. And actually starting to January Jonas Peterson at Southwest Michigan First is going to be the IEDC Board Chair for the next year. [Oh good.] So we've got deep connections within our Board. Obviously, Quenton is also on the board. We've got deep connections, Penny Lewandowski just stepped off the Board. But she's she's been highly involved in Michigan economic development work for a long time. So there's definitely some deep connections from Michigan on the IEDC board. And certainly, you know, in the work that we do.

E

Ed Clemente 15:55

Yeah, I know that we've mentioned some of your kind of stakeholders and partners anyway, but is there anyone else you want to kind of touch on a little bit that you think are pretty important for the future evolution of economic development that you work with now?

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Nathan Ohle 16:12

Well, the interesting thing, we're actually just announced last, in the last couple of weeks, a new program that's a partnership with the National Association of Counties, the National League of Cities, the National Association of Development Organizations, the International County and City Managers Association, the Center on Rural Innovation and the Regional Accelerator and Innovation Network. So it's a huge partnership, but it's all about creating what we're calling an Economic Recovery Core Program. It is about embedding fellows into communities and economic development organizations across the country for up to three years to help lead their economic development efforts kind of early- to mid-career folks that are going to come in and have be fully paid for by us and in our partnership. And be embedded in in what we would call distressed communities. So that can be rural could be urban could be tribal communities. But it's going to provide capacity for those communities to ensure that they can build out their economic development efforts that hopefully lead to more equitable economic outcomes in those communities. And that partnership with all of those organizations is incredibly important. And it's, it's unique because many of those organizations touch economic development, but aren't directly involved in economic development. Most of them are doing county management work or city management work. And for us to bring them together and to really help counties cities, entrepreneur support organizations understand their connection to economic development and help them step into the economic development world and a deeper fashion. Train them in the right ways and give them the resources and capacity to do this work is going to be hopefully just a tremendous asset to those communities and regions. And obviously a new opportunity to continue to build partnerships.

E

Ed Clemente 17:52

Yeah, I know that when I was a state rep five or four of my five cities, had emergency managers. And I used to be a city manager at one time myself. So I know that was the thing, I always tried to talk to the county about it, you know, all these communities qualify for these unique economic development tools, but they have no man power or whatever to figure out what they qualify for, or how to implement it and get advantages from it. I think that sounds like a great program, I have to congratulate you.

N

Nathan Ohle 18:22

Yes, its just a great opportunity to help really distressed communities build their own capacity, start to access some of these resources, and have a long term approach to it. It's a three year fellowship program, so it's not a one time, kind of one year infusion. It's a three year program that's fully funded for them, so that they can really step into this work, and identify and start to build out a long term, you know, strategy for that for their own community.

E

Ed Clemente 18:44

Wow, that sounds wonderful. While we're on the topic, what other I know, you've already touched on quite a few things like energy and things like that. But what other sort of trends do you maybe see for, you know, either nationally, locally that you haven't covered yet?

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Nathan Ohle 18:59

So I'll name two more. One is a focus on small business and entrepreneurship. We actually have a new certification program, specifically focused on entrepreneurship-led economic development. And this is an emerging trend not just here in the United States, but across the world, in really focusing on small business growth and entrepreneurship as a driver for economic growth in communities. And so we're training individuals, we're training organizations on how to take these approaches and drive more equitable economic outcomes through small business growth and entrepreneurship. But I think there's also a really deeply emerging trend on why this approach leads to better outcomes for communities and how it drives opportunity for communities. Whether you're a rural community of 500 people or an urban community of more than a million. These strategies are vital and important to making sure that we're embedding wealth locally in the long term. The second piece is really about collaboration. So you know, historically, the economic development field has been mostly about competition, competition, business to business community to community. You know, in some ways, pitting states against one another, communities against one another. And I think there's a growing evolution and understanding that collaboration is actually where the end game really is. And how do we build collaboration? How do we help communities understand their connectedness with those in the surrounding area? And even in some cases, state by state? How do we help states understand that when one state in a nearby benefits, it also may benefit that other state? And how do we help governor's understand that role? How do we help economic developers understand their role? And how do we build that connectedness that really leads to not just better outcomes, but also bringing together of communities. You know, today, there's a lot of conversations around urban versus rural, when in fact, when urban and rural communities start to work together and collaborate with one another, both benefit, and there's huge benefits to both, especially over the last three years, where we've seen the opportunity for people to work virtually, you know, that connectedness between communities is going to be really critical. And I think it's going to be an emerging trend.

E

Ed Clemente 20:57

Yeah, digital nomads cut both ways so you gotta be careful with how much you embrace it sometimes. But I want to, that's a really great topic too, because I always used to tell people, you know, that it is more about, you know, it's, I think of more like, you know, the bikers say, like, in the Tour de France, like you got a team of people. And then one person leaves for a while. So other people can rest, and but you eventually, you're all just trying to do your best times. And it's not necessarily about who you're riding next to as much as if you're doing the best you can do given what you have, right? And that's even better.

N

Nathan Ohle 21:35

Totally agree.

E

Ed Clemente 21:38

So, last few questions for you. So this is one I love to give to people, because it's a different answer for everybody. But if you could go back and talk to that person before you went to Michigan State, you're just coming out of Midland High School, what would you have told yourself today that maybe you didn't think about back then?

N

Nathan Ohle 21:58

I think, I think what I would have told myself something I learned very early on in my in my first job. And that is that not only do you have to believe in yourself, but you have to show others that you believe in yourself, because no one's gonna believe in yourself without you actually doing it yourself. And and you've got to show people that you do understand and have, you know, a desire to do this work. But also, it's okay to say I don't know. It's okay to say I don't know, but I'll find out. Because that will make a huge difference between either trying to make something up that is actually, you know, not not the case or not true and being okay with saying, I don't know. Many people today, and quite frankly, when I was going through college, you know, never wanted to say no and never want to say I don't know. And it's okay to say it, as long as you say, I don't know, but I'll find out. If someone's asking you for something in particular, because that the end, and obviously you have to follow up with them, but that builds relationships in really unique ways. It gives people an understanding that you're not going to just give them an answer that they want to hear. But you're going to come back to them and follow up with them with more information based on what they asked.

E

Ed Clemente 23:06

Yeah, I think that's a great lesson as someone that's been elected to have half my life, that, you know, you feel like the pressure to give a political answer or some answer just because you're asked. But honestly, I think most people do respond well, when they say, I don't know, I'm gonna get back to you on that. And most people are satisfied with that. But it's, it's you're right, it's a bit of ego you don't want to say you don't know sometimes. That's good advice. Yeah. Um, the last question is, you lived here, obviously, and you might have a favorite spot. I don't know how often you get back. But what did you like best about either living Michigan, a festival or location, something like that?

N

Nathan Ohle 23:46

Well, for me, it was Northern Michigan in the summer. You know, my parents had had a cottage up in Lake City, up by the Cadillac area. And so we were there every weekend of the summer, and quite frankly, most weekends in the winter, we'd go skiing. And so being up north, to me was always a great respite, a great chance to get away and even though we live in Northern Virginia now, you know, we come back every summer and try to get Northern Michigan. We've also brought friends back to Northern Michigan in the summers and people have people have not been there have no idea how beautiful it is. And especially people who've never seen a

great lake don't understand the expansiveness of the lakes. And so for me, summer in northern Michigan is absolutely the place that that is always in my heart. And it's an opportunity, we try and bring people back to show them what it's all about in the summer.

E Ed Clemente 24:30

You know, I've had the same experience we have a cabin up north too, and it's, it's almost like a whole different world sometimes when people see it for the first time and I can't believe, because they just think it's either Detroit, Grand Rapids, you know, Flint, Saginaw, whatever, but they don't really think about the nature side of Michigan a lot.

N Nathan Ohle 24:48

Exactly right.

E Ed Clemente 24:50

Well, anyway, I want to thank you again, our guest today I should mention Nathan Ohle was the President and CEO, is the President and CEO of International Economic Development Council. Plus, you're new into this job, I should have mentioned that upfront. Congratulations. How long you've been in the gig now for less than a year, right?

N Nathan Ohle 25:07

Nine months today, actually today. For me, it would be nine months. So nine months. I started February.

E Ed Clemente 25:13

Well, I know Quentin is very excited about you being there and a lot of the people you mentioned who serve on your board, even Jim McBride, my cousin, Jeff Donofrio said to say hello to you, too. I told him I'd be talking to you.

N Nathan Ohle 25:24

Please tell Jeff I say hello as well. He's a great guy.

E Ed Clemente 25:26

Yeah, so, and we'll make sure that everybody keeps in touch and hopefully we'll be able to circle back with you sometime in the future.



Nathan Ohle 25:34

Would be happy to do that, thanks so much for the opportunity.



Ed Clemente 25:36

Thanks Nathan. Join us next week where our guest is going to be Brad Garmon in a new role, the Executive Director for the Michigan Outdoor Recreation Industry Office.



Announcer 25:47

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