

# Ep.29 - Naheed Huq

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

economic development, workforce, southeast michigan, education, people, pandemic, opportunities, michigan, region, communities, eda, future, enabling, focus, area, support, counties, docklands, equity, mac

## SPEAKERS

Announcer, Ed Clemente, Naheed Huq

**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 we're very fortunate to have the Naheed Huq who is the Manager of Economic and Community Vitality for SEMCOG as well as the Vice President for Metropolitan Affairs Coalition. I know that's two titles, did I get them right for you Naheed? [Absolutely, yep.] And I am going to call you Naheed because you are a friend of mine from way back. I should give full disclosure, I think I was your Chair of one of your committees at one time, and I was on the Executive Committee for SEMCOG for quite a while too.

**N** Naheed Huq 01:06

You were and we really appreciate, I appreciate our friendship over the years.

E

Ed Clemente 01:10

Well, you are the expert in economic development you always have been. Why don't we start out with give a little definition first for SEMCOG, just what you would tell people if they've never heard of it before?

N

Naheed Huq 01:23

Okay, sure. SEMCOG is a Regional Planning Organization for the seven county region around Metro Detroit. This includes the counties of Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb, as well as Monroe, Washtenaw, Livingston, and St. Clair counties. We develop regional plans related to transportation, infrastructure, economic development and environmental issues. And we support this with data analysis, research, convening of partners and facilitation of discussions and advocating for issues that are important to our region.

E

Ed Clemente 01:52

And why don't you tell us what the initials stand for SEMCOG?

N

Naheed Huq 01:56

Sure, Southeast Michigan Council of Governments. We're a regional planning agency as well, as a Council of Governments, s we are a membership organization as well.

E

Ed Clemente 02:05

Yeah. Because I know when I serve, there was both townships, cities, counties, school boards is that most of them?

N

Naheed Huq 02:13

Yep, we have, we have seven counties, as well as many of the townships, cities and villages. In addition, SEMCOG's quite unique among Regional Planning agencies, in that we have education members. We currently have six community colleges, as well as six ISDs, Intermediate School Districts, not the local level, but the Intermediate School Districts that we work closely with and they actually share a lot of our information with local districts.



Ed Clemente 02:39

And I mainly served when I was a trustee for the community, Wayne County Community College District, right? [You did.] Yeah. And so let's now break apart MAC. So first, say what MAC means.



Naheed Huq 02:51

Okay, so MAC is the Metropolitan Affairs Coalition. This is a unique partnership of business, labor, government and education. And we have the leaders are focused on equity and sustainability, creating economic opportunity, improving quality of life, and promoting regional cooperation. And one of the things that we do is we sponsor the annual Shining Light Awards with the Detroit Free Press, which recognizes leading regional leadership, unsung heroes and future leaders. So MAC is a civic organization, and we work closely with SEMCOG.



Ed Clemente 03:25

Yeah, cuz I remember one time, they were a little bit more different. So it's unusual that you now are both, you're in both both worlds, right?



Naheed Huq 03:33

Yeah, we work very closely together. Because, you know, ultimately, we're bot, both organizations are focused on improving quality of life in our region. And therefore, it's we're working on issues that really impact the region, whether it's whether it's infrastructure, or economic development, a lot of our task forces are actually joint SEMCOG MAC task forces. And so a lot of our most almost all of our economic development and education work are jointly done by SEMCOG and MAC.



Ed Clemente 04:03

Well, okay, so that helps put some light on that. And then you have a unique accent, it might be exclusive to Oakland County, but but I know I listen to the BBC quite a bit and I know you have an English background. Why don't you kind of a little bit tell where you can't you know how you got to this, or how you first got to England? Maybe even.



Naheed Huq 04:23

Okay, well, I was gonna blame on the microphone. But since I can't do that, I did grow up

in England. I lived there for I've been in America for 30 years, and my accent comes and goes depending on who I'm talking to, or what technology I'm using. But I grew up in England, I my whole education was there. I ended up doing degrees in Geography, and Social Policy and Planning. So I was able to use a lot of that when I came to America, and I've worked with SEMCOG for 20 years now. And you're really working on issues that improve communities so so Social Policy and Planning really is about planning for the future, making sure that our communities are equitable, have good quality of life, and really sort of supporting jobs and community development. Those are my focus areas.

E

Ed Clemente 05:14

Well, I want to jump back one more time, though, I think you weren't born in England either, right? [Oh, no] cuz your folks are from another country, aren't they?

N

Naheed Huq 05:21

They are. I was born in Bangladesh. So I moved to England when I was three. And so like, most of my memories are really of, of England. But I did go back when I was a child, my parents would go on vacation, and we go to Bangladesh. And it was a very different experience. But um, you know, like, I actually went back to Bangladesh recently, after close to 30 years. And it was a totally different experience. But um, we have a strong Bengali community in Detroit area, as well. And so we have a lot of friends who are from Bangladesh here.

E

Ed Clemente 05:55

And, um, you just mentioned you briefly went over your, what your formal education was in, but you went to some pretty interesting universities too, right? One was at London School of Economics?

N

Naheed Huq 06:07

Yeah, I did, my master's degree from the London School of Economics and Social Policy and Planning. And my undergraduate degree was from the School of Oriental and African Studies. So I focused on I focused on Africa and Asia. And but it was just a really great experience. Both of these institutions were provided me with a lot of very good background and understanding and knowledge of the issues that we continue to work on in Michigan today.

E

Ed Clemente 06:33

It's funny, too, I think the first time I met you, you mentioned the geography. And I was teaching geography at that time. And I'd never it was just because I was something I'm still in love with is geography. But I think that probably tied in eventually with your training for economic development, because you studied some challenging sort of developing areas too, right, it wasn't just modern Europe or anything like that. It was tough.

N

Naheed Huq 06:59

Well, actually, one of my master's thesis was actually on the revitalization of London Docklands. And that was, show my age here, in the late-80s, um, really a lot of transformation was happening, you've got this total revitalization of an area that had suffered from huge community economic losses, as the industry changed from shipbuilding and very traditional blue collar work to more finance-based because the London Docklands area is just outside the city of London, you know, the main financial capital. And so over time, that area transformed into more of a financial center. And so the city expanded into this area that had been through really ignored, I would say, for a long time. And so that revitalization happened in front of me. And it was very exciting. And I think as we look at communities in Michigan and across the nation, you know, that revitalization of communities is possible. But it does require a lot of partnerships between all sectors to be able to make it happen. There's investment by the government, there's businesses really focused on investing in these areas. At the same time, the education and workforce development systems need to be there in order to create the jobs and train the future workforce. So something that, you know, something like London, Docklands 30 years ago, was, it's very similar to what's happening in Detroit that has been happening in many industrial cities in the US. And so it's really, it's a privilege to be working in economic development in Detroit. And I've been working with SEMCOG for 20 years, but I've seen the development and it's really amazing and very positive.

A

Announcer 08:56

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E

Ed Clemente 09:12

One other bit of education and this was the most recent one, but you did something and I don't even know much about it, but maybe you could give a quick before we're gonna get

back to SEMCOG and MAC in a second here, but the Aspen Institute, first of all, just quick 10 seconds, what is the Aspen Institute?

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Naheed Huq 09:30

Okay, well, it was the Aspen Institute, co-sponsored with the with JPMorgan Chase, and the Cooperation for Skilled Workforce, a Detroit Workforce Leadership program. About 2017, group of us, maybe about 25 of us, who were working in workforce development in the city and in the region, were brought together to take this leadership program where we try to understand the opportunities to create the workforce of the future, really understanding how we could overcome some of the challenges and barriers facing Detroiters in the workforce, but also people across the region. How can we overcome those barriers? And how can the Workforce Development System help. And the Workforce Development System is really a combination of workforce development, whether it's the MichiganWorks! and the public system, but also labor, also, training organizations, as well as education, as well, as employers, they all have to be at the table in order to create opportunities to get to expand our workforce. And so this leadership program helped us develop those connections with the other organizations that were working in the field, and helped us come together to develop opportunities to strengthen the workforce system. And it was, a lot of the focus was on enabling people who have been sort of traditionally out of the main workforce out of the out of the traditional workforce, giving them opportunities, providing those wraparound services, understanding some of the barriers, and helping them to overcome some of those, so that they were able to get into pre-apprenticeship programs or training programs that would enable them to ultimately enter family sustaining jobs. And really focusing on sort of overcoming barriers with the intention of increasing, you know, win win situation. So it's both in helping individuals get the jobs but also in enabling employers to get the workforce that they need. And by partnering with employers, we were able to create programs that really understood the needs of businesses so that the education and the training organizations were able to help individuals develop those particular skills, really is about improving opportunities to quality jobs.

E

Ed Clemente 11:54

And I mean, I'm gonna just tell any listeners, they should really look up the Aspen Institute, it's a pretty interesting organization in general of what they do their real futurist, aren't they, kind of a think tank?

N

Naheed Huq 12:06

They are, and they're also that really equity has become so much more important to our economy. SEMCOG, SEMCOG and MAC put together our economic development strategy for Southeast Michigan, so our for our seven county region. And our focus, we call the report, which was finalized earlier this year, Increasing Shared Prosperity for a Resilient Economy. Understanding that, you know, especially with the pandemic, you know, a lot of the disparities came to the forefront. And we realized that we really need to focus more on equity, as well as health. So those are the underlying sort of things through our report. And we have sort of six main strategies, we also have sort of 19 through 22 policies and 99 actions to achieve this, but really focusing on equity and health, and how we can improve opportunities for greater participation in our workforce. Our region is aging, we're also losing or we have a declining, traditional labor force, in terms of the prime labor force, aged 25 to 54 is declining. So we need to make sure that we can get everyone we possibly can into the workforce. And it helps individuals, but it also helps our economy. So a lot of the focus is on addressing labor force participation in enabling non-traditional workers, veterans, returning citizens, and people with lower levels of work experience or education, women, to re-enter the workforce and with the support systems they need to be able to succeed.

E

Ed Clemente 13:46

So that is done jointly through MAC and SEMCOG. And then is that the same as I know, we talked a little in the pre-call, but CEDS? Is that the same thing, or different?

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Naheed Huq 13:57

Yes. Yeah, it's the same thing. the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy is a is a product of the US Economic Development Administration. So by having a CEDS, Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy, we are we are able to access EDA funding for projects in our region. SEMCOG is more of a policy body but you know, we work with partners, we work with businesses through MAC we work with our other partners across the region, the counties, the other economic development entities in order to access funding. We support letters with pride letters of support, and help other organizations access funding so that they can actually do the work of economic development providing opportunities to people for both economic development in their communities, but also workforce development.

E

Ed Clemente 14:49

You work pretty closely even with the MEDC as well, correct?

N

Naheed Huq 14:52

Yeah, we like we like the MEDC. We, we've certainly got strong connections with them, and we appreciate that too.

E

Ed Clemente 15:00

No, no, no, I know that's how we used to work with him back, I think when I still was on your board. The one thing too, do you mind just giving again, a 10 second definition of what the EDA is, because a lot of people have never heard of the economic, whatever development administration is, thank you.

N

Naheed Huq 15:20

Okay, so the Economic Development Administration is part of the US Department of Commerce. And they, they are the economic development entity for federal programs across the country for economic development. They work largely with smaller communities, but they also work with communities that are distressed in some way or need support. So for example, um right now, the ADA has about I'm going to get my numbers wrong, but about \$3 billion in funding for economic development across the region. And we as a region are looking at that funding as well, including that is funding for Workforce Development to regional transformative performance programs, as well as coal communities. We in Southeast Michigan actually have several coal communities, communities that are impacted by the decline of coal. And so we're putting together a group of communities to sort of look at opportunities to access some of the funding that's been set aside for coal, communities impacted by coal. We're also really working with the Detroit Regional Partnership on their application, because we want to provide a very strong application for Southeast Michigan, we also are in the process of becoming an Economic Development District, which is an EDA designation that enables us to do more in the area of economic development. We would be able to both receive funding to do economic development with our communities, but also support their economic development applications for grants and other projects that can they can do community community projects that help their residents as well as their businesses. So EDA has been a strong partner with us on this.

E

Ed Clemente 17:06

So know I want you to focus a little bit you've touched on this already some but so what is the future going to be for both, you know, SEMCOG, or what do you guys like think you're gonna have to be dealing with in the near future? Because I know, that's something you



guys we always deal with, because you do long term planning, like 20 years?

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Naheed Huq 17:26

We do. Yeah, there's SEMCOG produces the Regional Transportation Plan, which is a long-range transportation plan, every five years or so, we update the 30-year plan. And as part of that, we look at trends in both demographics and the economy. And I mentioned before that our economy, our population is declining in terms of the working age population. So we need to be aware of what that means for opportunities to develop our economy. The lack of the workforce, or the lack of people to work could be a hindrance to our economic development in the future. So it's imperative that we really work with our economic development partners, to create, and our education partners, to ensure that people have the training they need for the jobs of the future. However, I think the future of work is complex. We, there's technology, there's business changes, there's also as a result of the pandemic, we're in a situation where we have people sort of staying out of the workforce, really valuing work life balance, and things like that are probably existed before, but really, were exacerbated by the pandemic. So we want to make sure that when we work to create, when we work with our partners, both business, labor, government, education, we want to make sure that they appreciate the opportunities to understand where employees are coming from, what the work future workforce is looking for. And we for example, with edge with education, we want to make sure that as students make decisions about what sort of careers they're going to go into, they understand where the jobs are going to be, but also understand that they need to be flexible about jobs, because they with technology could change things so drastically, that something that's a value right now may change. We want to work with our education partners, so that they provide both a combination of human or soft skills, as well as technical skills. And really, you know, through career exposure and awareness, enable students to figure out what their interests are, and really help develop those and make people more independent and nimble as they face the workforce of the future.

E

Ed Clemente 19:37

Yeah, it's not like when we got out of college, I'm a little bit more complex than it's ever been.

N

Naheed Huq 19:44

Yeah, I come out of it thinking this is, you know, we're expecting students to really balance a lot of different issues. But you know, I think as long as education, business, labor are on

the same page, workforce development on the same page, we can move forward And we can create the workforce of the future.

E

Ed Clemente 20:02

Well, just a couple more things. And what is I don't know if you plug this, but maybe you did. I didn't hear it, the you just finished a big economic development sort of Task Force.

N

Naheed Huq 20:13

Yeah, that was that was actually our Economic Development Strategies.

E

Ed Clemente 20:17

That's where it came from, because I was involved with that one. No, no, no problem. But I mean, I know that that was really refreshing just to hear because you had a really good mix of people for that. Because I mean, how many people were involved in that? I mean, you must have like, almost 100, or something.

N

Naheed Huq 20:36

I think yeah, between 60 and 80 on any one time, but we went met for about, we actually met for about a year, we started off before the pandemic. So we had our ideas in place we're thinking, this is what we're going to be doing. And then we I think we our first meeting was in February, and then the pandemic started in March. And then it's like, oops, things have changed. And so when we met in July, but for the second meeting, we said, okay, we need to reboot this, and really look at the impact of the pandemic. So health and equity had become so much more important and more visible, that we said, you know, these are things that we really need to focus on. There are so many people who need to, who could be in the workforce, if we could train them. There are so many opportunities for entrepreneurship and technology, how do we really build on those. So our economic development strategy, the CEDS, really looked at these six different areas that we should focus on. And that including preparing and connecting people to jobs, but looking at sort of placemaking as well as sort of technology, innovation and entrepreneurship, also looking at infrastructure, reuse of land, all these issues that have changed, and both challenges, but also opportunities for us to really focus on where would we want to go in the future. And something that came out of the economic development strategy was a series of community conversations that we held called The New Future of Southeast Michigan, and it's like, okay, so the pandemic change all these issues? What are we going to do about it? And what are those issues? So we had like

about seven different conversations about parks, trails, recreation, travel in mobility, um, human health care, education and workforce, government operations? How have these change, what we knew before? And what how they're going to change where we go in the future? What are the policies that we need to take on and promote so that we can, we can be in a better position in the future. But you know, it did also raise a lot of the lack of equity in many of cases, even something like parks and trails, and how can we increase equity there? How can we provide more green space around certain communities that don't have as much? And also, you know, health care, the future workforce? What it look like, so many people are burnt out in the health care industry, we need to make sure that we work with employers to understand and as well as education to prepare this pipeline going into education into the healthcare careers, but also understanding sort of how do we create workplaces that are more flexible, that provide the scheduling needs of employees, and so that they have that work life balance, as well as they're being appreciated by people, but also have to the opportunities to progress. So we look at different careers, and different sectors, depending on what what the data says, what the where the needs, but also, you know, what are the trends that are affecting our region? And so our Regional Development Forecast that is a report on demographic and populat demographic and economic trends in the next 30 years, forecast? We sort of use that to figure out okay, where do we need to focus? What are the opportunities? And how do we address some of the challenges that really make the most of the opportunities that we have. And we have lots of opportunities in Southeast Michigan, and we continue to look for more of them.

E

Ed Clemente 24:05

So I would think you would define all these documents, they would go to your website, I think it's just what semcon.org?

N

Naheed Huq 24:12

Yes, semcog.org and it's all there and you can also look up the Metropolitan Affairs Coalition through Google.

E

Ed Clemente 24:19

Well, you're gonna be shocked but we're sort of out of time. You do get to pick one spot as your favorite place you've been to in Michigan, or you like about Michigan?

N

Naheed Huq 24:27

Gosh, can I choose a season? I love fall in Michigan, I think it's the most beautiful place on earth. I love apple orchards. In fact, last Sunday, we were at Erwin Orchards in Milford and we go there once a year and we love to pick apples and cider and have donuts, so that's my favorite thing to do all year, so...

E

Ed Clemente 24:53

I want to thank again the Naheen Huq is the Manager of Economic and Community Vitality for SEMCOG and the Vice President for Metropolitan Affairs Coalition. Thanks again Naheed for taking time to do this today, it was pleasure.

N

Naheed Huq 25:06

Thank you so much for the opportunity.

A

Announcer 25:10

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