

Ep.33 - Brian Connors

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SPEAKERS

Announcer, Ed Clemente, Brian Connors

- 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
Hello, my name is Ed Clemente. I'm your host today for the podcast. And we're very fortunate to have with us Brian Connors, Partner, Due East Advisors. Welcome to the show, Brian.
- B** Brian Connors 00:40
Thanks Ed, great to be with you.
- E** Ed Clemente 00:41
Yeah, and I think that the title of your organization, let's start out with sort of, what is the Due East Advisors? And what is your migration pattern to get to this point, I think with your organization as well.
- B** Brian Connors 00:57
Sure, well, and part of the reason I'm so happy to have this chance to talk about Michigan opportunities with us because Due East Advisors is a business development consultancy, that has been engaged by the Michigan Economic Development Corporation to do business development with Mainland China and Taiwan. Those listeners who have known me from from having done this for some time will will also know that our organization has evolved through kind of a restructuring from the Michigan China Innovation Center, which was the title under which we did

this work for the last five years. Due East Advisors is, is now part of the family of organizations that ultimately reports up into the Attraction Team at the MEDC doing business attraction and business development for the State of Michigan.

E

Ed Clemente 01:53

It's more than just that too you, you also have boots on the ground, don't you and a couple of people and your staff?

B

Brian Conners 01:59

We do we do we've got a team. Every one of my team is is bilingual, English and Chinese and we've got a person in Shanghai in-market, which has actually been really helpful in order to keep things going during all these travel restrictions that we've all been facing.

E

Ed Clemente 02:17

And speaking I you know, just more from somebody used to teach history and geography but when you say Chinese, actually I think you speak fluent Mandarin. Correct? [That's right, Mandarin.] There is a big [number] but I think it's like, what 80% 90% speak Mandarin and 20% Cantonese?

B

Brian Conners 02:38

That sounds about right. Yeah, Cantonese is spoken generally, down in a band of the South. It's kind of close to Hong Kong and Guangzhou, Guangdong Province in that area. And again, they actually use the same written language, but it's pronounced differently, interestingly. And so the pronunciation is different enough that it's almost like French and Spanish, you know, that folks who, you know, are native, Cantonese speakers, they can understand, you know, pretty much Mandarin. But, but there is a there is a certain certain gap there between those dialects.

E

Ed Clemente 03:12

Yeah. And I think that you learn that I believe, you'll have to tell me where Williams College is somewhere in Massachusetts. Right? Yeah. And I would imagine, too, and this is more of a because I'm a nerd, but how many characters are roughly Chinese language, is it like thousands?

B

Brian Conners 03:21

Yeah, yeah. Western Massachusetts in the Berkshire, Berkshire Mountains. So yeah, I'd started my studies of Chinese there when I arrived freshman year, and I guess they they never stopped. It's a it's a continuing project to try to keep the Chinese fresh and just keep learning and learning new words all the time. Oh, it is. Yeah, it is 1000s it's something like 35,000 or something. So it it has, you know, the greatest number of characters of any language, any major language. But they say in order to be able to kind of read newspapers, you need to know about 3000 characters or so that are that are, and that's it, you can do it long weekends, you know, yeah.



E

Ed Clemente 04:15

Well, I know a lot of them are sort of like compound words too, where they're sort of structure of something that's a unique meaning for some origin of one thing, like, it's a certain kind of car. It's not just a truck, it's a pickup truck or something like that, right?

B

Brian Conners 04:29

Yeah, no, that's just a lot of it, yeah, a lot of words are made up like butterfly or, you know, guard rail or something where it's kind of a combination of the two separate words, but yep, it's it's never a dull moment, trying to keep up with the Chinese.

E

Ed Clemente 04:44

Yeah. And so I mean, honestly, it's more than just you experiencing it and doing it from here in Michigan. But it's also you live there for a while, right?

B

Brian Conners 04:57

I did. Yeah. I had the good fortune and good adventures to live in Beijing for about eight years, I lived in a city in, in central kind of Central Eastern China called Nanjing for a year as well. And that was kind of earlier on in my career when I was studying abroad there. And then, for a time, I actually founded and operated small restaurant and cafe chain too, which was just a wonderful thing to do kind of in my 20s and into my early 30s. There's no way to get to know a place better than I think, interacting with people over food and drink. And we did a lot of that at our place in Beijing.

E

Ed Clemente 05:44

Well, sort of foreboding for your future career at the MEDC just what I read on your resume, you also were involved with like a hotel, a shopping district, and some Neighborhood Improvement Association, which seems more like a Western concept. But is that something that is not a Western concept?

B

Brian Conners 06:01

Well, it's funny you should say that because I was involved in forming that organization. And I think some of my Chinese neighbors also felt that it was a Western concept and were a little confused by it, but we did. It was you know, we had a commercial district there and it needed some improvements. And the place is starting to look a little rundown so we got people together and, and through some negotiations, we got a pot of money together and made some improvements to just shrubbery and some of the landscaping and stuff and it came out great it came out great.

E

Ed Clemente 06:35

Was it a hutong, or no?

B

Brian Conners 06:37

No, no, the hutongs are really neat, old alleys in the center of Beijing. The location where we did that improvement stuff was out actually in the University District, very close to Peking University, and Ching Hua University.

E

Ed Clemente 06:54

So let's say, you know, how this prepared you for what you do now, because, obviously, trade and economics is critical to everything in the life being, especially, you know, in today's sort of supercharged sort of polarized world sometimes. How do you navigate that? And what do you how do you help businesses out in Michigan? You know, navigate that, probably more importantly?

B

Brian Conners 07:18

Yeah, no, I think it was, it all has been good prep, and has culminated in you know, really being able to do my my dream job, you know, which is promote my, my hometown, promote my home state, and also do it across cultures. And that's definitely you know, China, using the language and the business environment, using it in my job is, is kind of a common thread throughout my career. And, you know, now that we're, our primary function is to convince foreign investors to choose to put their jobs and their facilities in Michigan. It gives you a chance to really focused the conversation, right? You know, we still are interacting with folks, we're building relationships, building friendships, but, you know, we also get a chance to really pitch our home state. And, and of course, you know, when in the process, a lot of times the investors will come over and actually do tours of the state of Michigan. So it's been a real fun cultural experience to bring some executives to parts of Michigan that, you know, surely they would never see if they came over on a recreational tour or something. You know, we're taking them in into different parts of Michigan, you know, rural, suburban, you name it all over the place, but it's a rich experience. And it's a it's definitely a pleasure to be able to do that.

E

Ed Clemente 08:46

Anecdotally, I know you. In our pre-call. We talked a little bit about you've done projects around the state, right? Is there any like ones you might want to highlight like somewhere we wouldn't expect that, you know, China could have involved in it or any Eastern, due east country would?

B

Brian Conners 09:00

Yeah, sure. So you know, in our we do business development with both Mainland China and Taiwan. And companies from you know, both for mainland in China and Taiwan have come over and set up in Michigan. We've actually got a pretty sizable cluster. I'd say in this regard, Michigan really punches above its weight. Partly because the automotive industry, you know, long after the early waves of the German, Japanese, Korean companies and Chinese companies are coming a lot of them are automotive suppliers. And they tend to you know, they locate all over the state, just as many of our great manufacturers do. You say kind of, you know, iconic projects. I mean, one I'm really proud of is that we were, I think instrumental in bringing a company called CITIC Dicastal to the town of Greenville, outside of Grand Rapids. And, you know part of the reason that was significant was because, you know, Greenville was a company town. You know, it had Electrolux there for a long time and many 1000s of jobs. And then the Electrolux facility, decamped, I believe for Mexico. Later on, there was a Uni-Solar facility that was built there to hopefully revitalize, but that ended up not going well either. So Greenville was relatively hard hit in terms of unemployment. And this

manufacturer, which incidentally makes aluminum wheels, so they're not the tires, but the actual wheel itself. And aluminum wheels is kind of the wave of the future. With fuel efficiency and lightweighting. There's more and more aluminum that's going into vehicles. So anyway, aluminum wheels, and they they're making them from, you know, taking bars of aluminum melting them down, and forming them into wheels, doing all the machining, painting everything on-site in Greenville, and they employ more than 500 people. So you know, when that happens, it's it's a great day, because we're able to land an employer that, you know, it creates more demand for our wonderful Michigan workforce. If you want to go get a job, there, great. You know, but regardless, having more employers coming into the state, it brings new opportunities for some folks, it increases demand for everybody's wages as well, right? It just begin lifts, lifts all boats, I think when when those employees decide to come in put up operations here. So yeah, Greenville, CITIC Dicastal, that was that was a great project. And we've got dozens of others.

E

Ed Clemente 11:36

So if some company, like a smaller operation, they can't afford to hire somebody, you also assist in those areas, too. Like if somebody had to go overseas to, you know, anywhere in the East, do you mainly just work with companies coming here? So I'm not even sure of the scope of everything you do?

B

Brian Conners 11:55

Yeah, I mean, we primarily focus on the inbound investment side, in our work with the MEDC. Now, another one of your guests, Natalie Chmiko, who works on the trade side, and so they're frequently assisting folks in Michigan companies that are looking to increase their exports abroad. And that sometimes involves sales office or warehouse or something, you know, somewhere else, but we're primarily focused on job creation right here in the Great Lakes State.

E

Ed Clemente 12:25

And so, you know, as obviously, we go through all these sort of major challenges right now, I'm kind of, do you have any, like, partners you work with, like, beyond the MEDC too, or do you have, like, I don't think you have a board. Right? You're kind of an independent consulting firm, right?

B

Brian Conners 12:46

Yeah, that's right. Yeah, that's, that's right. We don't, but then in terms of partnerships, I mean, they're, they're absolutely indispensable. And every time that we work on a project that's going to land someplace in Michigan, we're uh, we're always doing that in lockstep with our local economic development partners. And I mean as you are well aware, besides the MEDC and Lansing, there is a huge network of great professionals in the economic development field, who in their localities play just critical roles for retention, talent programs, expansions, you name it. So whenever we're going into a place where we're, they're showing a site together with our local partners, where they're hammering out a deal with, you know, the potential investor together with a local partner. So like, for example, I just mentioned Greenville, that falls in a territory that was serviced, I believe still is, with The Right Place in Grand Rapids. So for that project, you know, I was on the phone all the time with with then was was Birgit and now Mr. Thelen, over there ably heading the organization. So yeah, we're always working with our local partners. And then more broadly, in terms of trying to have our antenna out in the marketplace, trying to identify companies that might have interest in coming and, and choosing Michigan. For that we also have kind of a network of different partnerships, mostly in the target market, which for us is, again, Mainland China and Taiwan. So we're frequently doing activities and exchanges with different industry associations or different regional players in parts of those markets that have

concentrations of our best kinds of industries, right? We're an automotive place, right? And we're a manufacturing place in Michigan. So you know, typically we're not over in China talking to, you know, producers of, say, oil machinery or something right, we're talking with counterparts that are complimentary to our industry mix over here.

A

Announcer 14:56

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E

Ed Clemente 15:11

What do you consider some of your trends that you see coming up and either on the horizon? Or things you think that might disrupt what you're doing too?

B

Brian Conners 15:19

Yeah, great question. You know, automotive is still king, I'd say part of the reason is, China is the biggest automotive producer in the world, they're biggest automotive market in the world. And of course, we're the, the, the leader of the West, you know, arguably the world, but a certainly in the United States, you know, where the greatest concentration. So it's kind of a very natural marriage in the automotive industry. But, you know, beyond that, if you look at parts of that industry that are changing quickly, electrification is huge. And China is a global leader in electrification, they sell and use a lot more electric vehicles in China at this time than than we do in the States. And that means that a lot of their suppliers for components and batteries and things like that they've got a lot of powerful players and some of those players, again, we're not trying to convince them to come to the States, it's when they they've already decided they're coming to the States, we want to convince them to land in Michigan, and come and contribute to the local economy here. So electrification and electrical components, that is a big one across China and Taiwan. And another one I'll mention everybody has been following the, the chips crisis that's been happening, this huge shortage of microchips and semiconductors that go into it turns out everything that means everything, yeah, everywhere. And, you know, everyone suddenly became aware, wow, Taiwan, Taiwan, turns out makes so many of the world's semiconductors, they just got a great companies, they call them 'fabs,' these big fabrication plants, foundries, where they actually make the physical, you know, wafers and make the chips. There's some terrific Taiwanese companies. And so we are keeping an eye also out for opportunities now as some of that the supply chain for semiconductors onshores or reshores, as it were, with to the United States, I think there will be some opportunities for Michigan, especially with the automotive demand for semiconductors for some players who want to be both close to the automotive industry and able also to find the talent that they need here in Michigan.

E

Ed Clemente 17:35

And, you know, I don't think people have any idea of the overhead that's involved in making microchips. I think it's probably one of the most expensive sort of manufacturing there is in the world. Like I remember reading somewhere, there's like one company in the Netherlands that can even make the machines to do it. And they're like obscene amounts of money just for one of them. And so it's not that easy to just all of a sudden flip the switch and say, oh, we're going to make a bunch here, we're gonna make a bunch there. So that's a, that's gonna be a big challenge, I think, globally for a little while.



B

Brian Connors 18:08

It is, and we're doing our best to stay on top of the trends, but it sounds like that. Analysts are saying that the demand will just continue to grow. So we have at this time, not enough capacity for current demand, and there's been a response by companies like TSMC in Taiwan, like Intel and others who are making big splashy announcements. They're building new fabs. But even at that, I think that demand is supposed to outstrip that capacity too, so we're hoping that some of those big projects may take a good look at Michigan.

E

Ed Clemente 18:45

Well, we're down to a few more questions. And this one, I think you're very modest person, but I do believe you got your master's degree from John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. I had a summer fellowship there but didn't get a degree. But I was in the John F. Kennedy School, Taubman Center, all those kinds of places. I'm sure you're familiar with them all. But what advice, if you could go back and talk to yourself and I know you grew up in Grand Rapids originally. What advice would you give somebody or if you go back and talk to yourself, or you know, just like what would you tell if your kids right now we're about to graduate or a junior in high school? What would you tell them to do?

B

Brian Connors 19:28

That's a fun one. I would say. You don't have to have it all figured out, yet. I think that would be my advice. You know, there are some jobs where you know, for example, if you've decided you want to be a surgeon, then there's a pretty set career track that you need to go through, your medical school, residency and onward and there you go. And others may be like being an academic, you know, complete a PhD. And then there's kind of a track for that. But the vast majority of jobs out there don't follow those kind of, you know, prescribed tracks. And they don't tell you that, I feel like you know, you sort of you see, well there's there's the law school, do you want to be a lawyer and there's a nursing school, do I want to be a nurse or, you know, but there's so many jobs out there where, you know, if you look at frankly, a lot of us in the field, probably economic development, if you'd asked us when we were 22, you know what it is, you probably wouldn't even have any idea. And so, you know, my advice is, don't freak out if you don't have it figured out yet. You know, grad school, if you intend to do some grad school later, actually doesn't matter if it's grad school, or just learning as you go. The future learning that you do, will will guide you. So as you as you go along, you know, just just learn as much as you can do as well as you can, you know, think critically about your direction and all that, and you're going to do great. And don't and don't worry about not knowing what the, where the finish line is, you know, when you're 20 years old?

E

Ed Clemente 20:58

Well, that's usually my favorite question. I like to know the trends and future predictions and people's background, but I mean, I look at my own path, and I can see it, looking back, I could never have seen it going forward. And so it's funny, it's more of a compass direction, I think for me than it is like a path, you know, and so that's been fortunate, but yeah, it's good advice. Um, and I know that there's a ton more questions because I am deeply engaged in following what goes on and I know I send you a lot of emails, but I just I'm just so interested that I'm so glad that I'm around at this time in my life because even I know there's kind of craziness there's also huge opportunities that are happening in the world. And if you're a smart person, you can figure out niches that you couldn't have figured out 20 years ago, that there's ways to do things and I think you've created that with that open-minded approach I think you just suggested. Hopefully your kids will hear this when they're in high school. And they might go Oh, hey, dad had some good advice. Um, anyway, the last question is pretty simple. Um, what do you like best about you've lived in China which not many people have but what do you like best about living in Michigan?

B

Brian Connors 22:19

Oh, Michigan, outdoors Yeah, I can't get enough of the you know going just exploring especially the far you know the further with no offense that people living in southern Michigan, I'm sure it's beautiful there too, I love heading north, any place up north. You know it gets to be you know, greener just more trees, more hills, more lakes everywhere. And there's just enough there to explore for a lifetime and you know, it's actually been great in pandemic we've been relatively, you know, kind of confined to you know less flying and all that and it's been the greatest time of just rediscovering all the beauty that's right in our backyard. So all those you know you look at the map, all those green places all the state forests, national forests, you know city parks, you name it, it's a it's just an enormous wealth of beautiful places to go visit. I love them. I'm a hiker. You know, I like to hike I love to go for a swim in a lake. So you know, any any chance I can get out and just see Michigan? That's that's what I like to do.

E

Ed Clemente 23:28

One last thing, I should have mentioned this, but say, someone listens to this podcast because the audience is pretty broad for this. It's not like a narrow niche. People always ask me who listens I go, you'd be surprised who listens. It's might not be like the you know, the crowd you'd expect always. But where would somebody if you were a city, you thought you had some you might be interested in, or how could they reach you? Is there a good website there? You know, link for you to go to? How would they get ahold you?

B

Brian Connors 23:56

Oh, yeah, we'd love to love to talk to anybody who has, is interested. And certainly those who are interested in maybe looking to Michigan, they can find us at the MEDC's website, which is michiganbusiness.org. I think the quickest way after landing on that site would just be to type in my name, Brian Connors. You'll see my contact information there and the region that we cover and some great information about our national and international attraction efforts.

E

Ed Clemente 24:22

Well, we're out of time Brian, I just want to thank you very much. I know you've got a busy schedule. You have to cover the whole world. But we want to thank you again, Brian Connors, Partner at Due East Advisors. Thanks again for taking time to do this today, Brian,

B

Brian Connors 24:37

It's been a real pleasure, thanks so much Ed.

A

Announcer 24:40

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