

Ep.2.10 Mike Piskur

Tue, 5/3 11:56AM 23:43

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

michigan, great lakes, great lakes region, region, thinking, state, investment, bonds, sustainable, canadian provinces, opportunity, work, premiers, business, recognizing, lake michigan, tourism promotion, serves, partners, chicago

SPEAKERS

Announcer, Ed Clemente, Mike Piskur



Announcer 00:02

Welcome to The Michigan Opportunity, an economic development podcast featuring candid conversations with business leaders across Michigan. You'll hear firsthand accounts from Michigan business leaders and innovators about how the state is driving job growth and business investment, supporting a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem, building vibrant communities and helping to attract and retain one of the most diverse and significant workforces in the nation.



Ed Clemente 00:28

Hello, I'm your host, Ed Clemente, and we have a more exotic visitor from Chicago and I want to thank Mike Piskur, he's the Program Manager for the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Governors and Premiers. I might have had extra and in there, but I'll let you explain what that title means. But welcome to the show, Mike.




Mike Piskur 00:48

Hey, thank you, Ed, my pleasure. Really glad to be here.



Ed Clemente 00:50

Yes, and even though you're based in Chicago, you do quite a bit with Michigan and the Great Lakes region. Why don't you sort of, because your title really doesn't say what your organization sort of does. So if you met somebody at a party, what would you ask? Or what would you tell them if they asked you what you do?



M**Mike Piskur 01:09**

Sure. So the Great Lakes St. Lawrence Governors and Premiers is a nonpartisan partnership of the eight US states in the two Canadian provinces in the Great Lakes region. So we work at the direction of the Governors and Premiers as the name would imply, we work on a portfolio of issues that aim to grow the regional economy and protect the environment in the region. So just to give a few specific examples, for those listeners who are familiar with the Great Lakes Compact, our organization serves as the Secretariat to that agreement that covers different water uses throughout the entire Great Lakes region. We also work on a range of issues including invasive species, maritime transportation, trade promotion, tourism promotion, and then what my work focuses on mostly these days, which is Impact Investment, and the Great Lakes Impact Investment Platform. So you know, everything we work on kind of strikes that balance between economic growth and environmental protection, recognizing that job creation and growing the environment sustainably, excuse me, growing the economy sustainably is important. At the same time, we have to recognize that we have to protect the environment and make sure those two are, are in harmony. Speaking a little specifically about the Impact Investment Platform, this is really looking at establishing the Great Lakes region as a hub for financial innovation, and really positioning it as an opportunity-rich area. There's a global trend right now, where trillions of dollars are seeking some kind of return beyond just the financial. So financial return, yes, but also that additional benefit, environmental, social goals, there's a lot of different terms that get thrown around for this, you heard sustainable investment, principles of responsible investment, ESG. Really what it's all about is that kind of dual return. And we see the Great Lakes region as a place again, rich in opportunity, a lot of different, innovative approaches happening, and for those investors who are looking to have that impact, something that's place-based in the Great Lakes region, that's what it's all about.

E**Ed Clemente 03:05**

And you did plug two of our previous guests without you even knowing it, or not two guests, but at least one we've mentioned a lot on the show. But first of all, Jim Weakley, I think you've worked with him, and he's with the freighters, what's it called, the Great Lakes Freighters?

M**Mike Piskur 03:21**

Yeah, the Lake Area Association. Definitely know Jim very well. Yeah. So I've managed our maritime program for many years before my current focus. And yeah, we know, Jim well, he leads the kind of US flag vessels across the region. And yeah, happy to talk more about maritime for sure.

E**Ed Clemente 03:38**

Yeah, no, no. And another one was something we brought up in our pre-call you and I think it's an interesting anecdote, but your relationship with David Lorenz, why don't you kind of explain what you guys do together? Who works for Pure Michigan, and at the MEDC, of course, and for the state of Michigan.

M**Mike Piskur 03:57**

M MIKE PISKUR 05:37

Yeah, absolutely. So I mentioned tourism promotion as part of our work. A big part of that is called Cruise the Great Lakes and it's aimed at promoting the cruise industry in the region. So it's really focused on bringing more consumer cruisers to the region. So this is basically a consortium of the states in the provinces, of cities, ports, convention and visitors bureaus, cruise lines, others across the region, really looking at creating kind of a single brand for the Great Lakes region, and really attracting more passengers and cruise lines to the region. So Dave Lorenz, of course with MEDC, Pure Michigan, he serves as the Chair of Cruise the Great Lakes and has since its inception in 2018. So he's been a great partner, obviously, is a wealth of knowledge on the topic. And you know, I think Pure Michigan as a brand is really looked at as kind of the gold standard of state tourism promotion. So to have his leadership has been really critical.

E Ed Clemente 04:52

Well, if Dave Lorenz was here, he'd stopped the podcast now and dropped the mic. Yeah, but we appreciate you giving us that plug. And, you know, I one other thing that I sort of leapfrogged ahead on some of your remarks, but I wish you would explain the eight states and then the two provinces, just so everybody exactly knows, you know, for example, I believe Governor Whitmer as on one of your boards, right, or your board? I'm not sure.

M Mike Piskur 05:22

That's right, exactly. So the Governors and the Premiers serve as our Board of Directors. So of course, that includes Governor Whitmer. So if you're thinking on the map, it's starting in the west and Minnesota, stretching across Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York in the east. And then the two Canadian provinces are Ontario and Quebec. So it's the Great Lakes, the five great lakes, and then the St. Lawrence River, which is all from a scientific standpoint, it's kind of viewed as one big hydrologic system. And, you know, basically looking at that is kind of the unifying force for the region, something we're all working together to protect. And like I said, the organization itself is really focused on that mission, as well as the sustainable growth of the economy.

E Ed Clemente 06:05

Have you ever thought of saying we're the Mediterranean of North America?

M Mike Piskur 06:09

No, but I like that. That's a good that's a good one, we might have to look into that as we're promoting cruise ships come here?

E Ed Clemente 06:15

Well, royalties. So the reason I say it is because I've I get a lot of feeds for travel things. And I'm seeing more and more the Great Lakes, especially since, you know, sort of COVID, you know, a

seeing more and more the Great Lakes, especially since, you know, sort of COVID, you know, a lot of people are staying domestically in North America, right? So I think it's actually, I don't know how it's doing, but I just know that you guys are doing a good job with it because I do see more and more exposure to that opportunity. Why don't you get more, let's say get a little bit more back to just a explain to some folks this is more of a basic political science question, but the Premiers, why don't you explain just a teeny bit? A Premier is a little different than a governor, right?

M

Mike Piskur 06:58

Exactly, so it's the Parliamentary System in the Canadian provinces. So the Premier is the head of the government is the head of the party. So it has the same, it's, they're the top elected official in their respective province. So it's the counterpart of the governor. But you know, the governor is, of course, in our state separate from the legislature, whereas, you know, the premier would be the head of the government for the state overall, including the parliament.

E

Ed Clemente 07:27

I asked that question, because I used to teach both high school political science and I taught for a university. So it is amazing how much Americans probably don't know, the country right next to us, sometimes the difference between the two, but it's important to distinguish that sometimes. I don't know if everybody always gets, even though we work together, there's still big differences somewhat in the way the system works.

M

Mike Piskur 07:50

Absolutely, definitely differences, but also, you know, a lot of common ground. And, you know, over over the years, the premiers have become closer and closer as a part of our work. About five years ago, they shifted from being associate members to full and equal across the 10 jurisdictions. So you know, everybody sees kind of the value of thinking regionally and working together regionally.

E

Ed Clemente 08:09

And I like the angle you're talking about with sort of like a global, gets back to my Mediterranean analogy, but like, how we're marketing our region, both for business, economic development, tourism, whatever, but you've got some interesting little bits of background in your own educational. I see you went to both Oxford, and then I think Budapest, right? Can you explain both of those because I think that's pretty interesting. And we don't meet many folks who've been to both of them.

M

Mike Piskur 08:38

Sure. Yeah. So starting at the top, so my, you know, I live in Chicago. My undergrad was here in Illinois, University of Illinois. I did spend a semester as an undergrad in Budapest, Hungary. And that was, you know, really interesting time there as they were sort of transitioning out of kind

of the post-Soviet era and moving into the European Union and things like that. So really interesting to learn about kind of the political situation, there. A couple 2018, now, I was able to spend a week in Oxford as part of a program focused on sustainable finance, which has been instrumental to the work I do now. But that was, you know, really eye opening, besides being an amazing place just to go to, obviously, an exceptional world-class learning institution, and one that was great from just knowledge, networking and everything like that, so.

E

Ed Clemente 09:24

I've been there for rugby, but that was the only time I was ever in Oxford. You actually got to go into some classrooms, we were just out in the field.

M

Mike Piskur 09:32

Yeah, we had we had lunch in the Harry Potter dining hall. So very, very cool. Very cool.

A

Announcer 09:39

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E

Ed Clemente 09:54

Why don't you break down a little bit more about this sustainable financing? And and it's kind of a complicated thing like a lot of complicated financial things are, could you put it into sort of common terms? Why Michigan businesses would, you know why it's sustainable for both private sector as well as for the environment?

M

Mike Piskur 10:14

Sure. So I talked a bit before about the lakes being kind of the unifying force for the region, and it's the source of our prosperity. And, you know, there's there's this kind of growing need, recognizing we have a tremendous need to fund different environmental projects. And while government is part of that, public investment is part of that, it's not the only answer. At the same time, as I talked about before, there are many trillions of dollars globally circulating that are looking for these sorts of, you know, return plus, if you will, type investments. So we've been saying, hey, look, the region here, you know, it's easy to be kind of humble Great Lakes, Midwesterners, and focus just on our home, but we have 20% of the world's surface freshwater, 85% for North America. We have tremendous sort of natural resources in terms of forests, agricultural lands, and all these other things. And you know, each one really provides a major opportunity for for those investors. So the idea here is, let's think differently about the way we manage our resources. Moving away from this sort of traditional model of use a resource, degrade it, and then after the fact, at great expense, cleaned it up, say, hey, let's be smarter

about the way we're using it now, recognizing that it holds tremendous economic value for the region. How do we take better care of it on the front end to more manage, more sustainably manage it in the long run.

E

Ed Clemente 11:33

Yeah, when I was in the legislature, I did. I think I did most of the bills for brownfield redevelopment. And it was such a huge cost for super funds and all those types of locations. And, you know, if you could do it better, I guess ahead of time, it would save us more money in the long run. But it's always tough, you know, to make that case, to show we're saving you money by being more sustainable upfront, right?

M

Mike Piskur 11:58

Yeah, exactly. Well, I can give a couple of Michigan specific examples. Number one, there's Michigan Saves, which is the state green bank its a nonprofit Green Bank. They finance energy efficiency, renewable energy projects, things like this. So while the all of these projects have a demonstrable environmental benefit, they also can generate economic benefits for homeowners, businesses, and others, ratepayers and taxpayers. So it's showing that there's, you know, a sustainable way to do it, we can achieve these environmental outcomes and at the same time, make better use of limited financial resources. Another one I would talk about is green bonds, which for those who are familiar with kind of the municipal bond space, from a financial standpoint structured exactly the same as the standard municipal bond. However, it's tied to some sort of demonstrable outcome. So there's the use of proceeds, you know, we're going to issue a bond for \$20 million, this is just an example, and it's going to be used for X project, and then that project will generate specific returns. So in Michigan, DTE for example, has done this to drive decarbonisation through the electrical supply for the state, issued several billion dollars worth of green bonds and are going to have over the lifetime of the bonds absolutely tremendous reductions of carbon, excuse me, carbon usage, and really just deriving major benefits for the region.

E

Ed Clemente 13:21

Yeah, and I know you and I gave a couple other examples a little bit about that, but is there any other sort of, so like, if you were a regular person that didn't know what green bonds were, but maybe you were like a city manager or a regional economic development organization, do you have any sort of examples where they could use that sort of green bonds?

M

Mike Piskur 13:45

Absolutely. I mean, any bond issuer is able to issue a green bond. So, municipal government, a port for example, you know, really kind of any governmental type agency serves, certainly in the private sector to corporations issuing bonds as well. So, you know, it's kind of a rapidly evolving space, the thing that's really interesting about it is they're starting to show evidence of what's called a green premium or a greenium, where it's basically showing that by tying these bonds, and by tying the proceeds to specific outcomes, you can actually get a better

borrowing rate, it becomes more attractive to purchasers of the bond. So we actually worked with a professor Peter Adrian's at the University of Michigan, who did some research on this to start to quantify what that greenium looks like. It's really kind of in its infancy, but it's starting to become more and more apparent, not just in our neck of the woods, but throughout North America and globally. And you know, this is something again, it's saying, hey, if you are a city government or some other body, public body, you can say, hey, this might be an attractive way we can achieve our goals and at the same time, actually do it and lower our cost of capital.

E

Ed Clemente 14:51

Yeah and you and I even talked a little bit about, it doesn't make sense to build out new infrastructure when there's so many communities especially you know, in Michigan, sort of the rust belt, and I'm sure Chicago had little bits of it too, we should be able to figure out how to reinvest back in those communities, rather than expand or sprawl out in other places.

M

Mike Piskur 15:10

Right, exactly. Yeah, there's, you know, we saw this on our maritime transportation work for example. It was really a tremendously underutilized asset, a lot of infrastructure that was maybe being used at 50%, whether that goes for locks or ports, or whatever the case may be. So yeah, to your point, you know, instead of maybe building new infrastructure, hey, how can we get more out of what we already have? We've had these legacy investments, perhaps it takes some investment to maintain them or upgrade them, but you know, there's certainly much better use that can be made out of things that we already have at our disposal.

E

Ed Clemente 15:42

You know, and you give one other example. I think it was, I don't know what university it was either northern or Michigan Tech that was doing some, I think it's like drone ships. I forgot the name of the program, you know it better than I do.

M

Mike Piskur 15:59

Yeah. That's Michigan Tech in Houghton. They have the Great Lakes Research Center and they are running a program around autonomous vessels. So actually, our organization Great Lakes Governors and Premiers, we worked with the State of Michigan and MTU to set up a testbed there. So basically, they test kind of small, autonomous vessels, smart ships for different applications, like research and lake bottom mapping, and things like that. Really cutting edge stuff, super innovative, and, you know, really interesting. Kind of a glimpse into the future of what maritime transportation might look like.

E

Ed Clemente 16:34

Another thing, Mike, I should have mentioned, but I zoomed over a bunch of your answers. So I know you probably had a couple things you wanted to bring up that you probably should have brought up earlier. But you get to be partners, stakeholders, and then I have another question

brought up earlier. But you got to be partners, stakeholders, and then I have another question for you after that.

M

Mike Piskur 16:50

Sure. Yeah, definitely want to give a shout out to some of the groups who work with in the State of Michigan. Yeah, I talked at the state level, I talked already about MEDC, but we do a lot of work with other state departments, the DNR, Egle, the Michigan Department of Transportation, all been really great partners on a variety of things. At the university level, beyond University of Michigan and Michigan Tech, we also have worked with the Axia Institute at Michigan State, that is the supply chain and logistics group there, so they've been a great partner. Specific to our Impact Investment Platform, beyond U of M we have the Nature Conservancy, we have ECT, which is a consulting group based out of Ann Arbor. So really a diversity of different partners that are really deep bench of great institutions and organizations throughout the state of Michigan.

E

Ed Clemente 17:35

Yeah, you kind of covered the whole state with all those groups, so we appreciate you working with us. And I would imagine Michigan, because we're probably touching, how many lakes do we touch four? I should know my math better, but yeah, I think it's four. So we touch Michigan, Erie, Huron and Lake Superior, of course. So, beyond any of those partners, do you see any challenges or trends that are going to either help or, like slow the process down, or change it completely?

M

Mike Piskur 18:07

Sure. So you know, it's thinking about our work on the Impact Investment Platform, and a lot of the thinking we've done and a lot of the work has been around looking at these different environmental changes and metrics. So things like energy being saved, or carbon being reduced or stored, and thinking about carbon, not just as sort of a challenge as it relates to global climate, but as a potential economic development opportunity for the region. So you know, kind of in terms of trends, saying okay, we have climate change which represents this risk to ecosystems and to business and to the environment, that's kind of one big macro thing. But then thinking about it, if you're a business owner, you might have shareholder pressure or stakeholder pressure, to reduce your emissions or to understand better what your climate risk is, different regulatory requirements that may or may not be coming at the federal or other level. So you know, that's kind of one side of the challenge in this huge investment need I talked about, of you know, you have this money seeking projects, but then at the same time, we need to think about, okay, well, what are those projects? How can they make themselves sort of fees suitable for that sort of investment? But then thinking about the solution, you know, I talked about the economic development opportunity of carbon, how do we begin to think about it, as you know, not necessarily a problem or a waste product or pollution, but a raw material or a commodity. You know, recognizing there's lots of different ways to tackle the problem from things like forests of course, in what are called nature-based solutions and kind of the term of art, but different technological things that are happening, carbon capture and all these sort of cutting edge things that are happening. You know, Larry Fink, who's the CEO of Blackrock said that the next 1000 unicorn startups, so billion dollar startups, would be in the

climate tech space. So that is a major opportunity and something that you know, really everyone needs to be thinking about is you know what? That's kind of the the future gonna look like.

E

Ed Clemente 20:02

And I would imagine with you working with Michigan State and U of M and all universities, that that tech transfer process for those kind of sort of next phase of energy as well as sustainable sort of economic development, you're going to be working with them even more so in the future, it sounds like. You follow the Blackrock model kind of, right? Yeah,

M

Mike Piskur 20:25

Absolutely. I mean, great things happening at university levels across the state, across the state and the region, really, within government, private sector, you know, everyone. You see a lot of resources, brainpower, capital being deployed to to address this challenge.

E

Ed Clemente 20:41

Well, my last question and a half is, what would you go back and tell yourself if you were in high school? What advice, because you've had a pretty broad educational background, but what would you go back and talk to your high school self about? What would you do differently this time?

M

Mike Piskur 20:58

Yeah, well, I took a credit securitas route to get to the work I do now in terms of, especially as it relates to sustainability and environment, and you know, one of the things that led me there was, was thinking about kind of the geopolitics of energy, which was a big focus of when I was an undergrad, and starting to see the connections between those things. So you know, speaking to my 18 year old self, I definitely would say, hey, just get to it. Kind of take the shortcut and get there quickly. You know, in just generally speaking, for people who are thinking about their kind of career path, you know, sustainability, it's not separate from business, it's part of it. It's part of every sector, if you're in engineering, if you're in public policy, finance, whatever the case may be, there's that relationship between your industry and the environment, thinking about how they relate, thinking about the way to balance them. And you know, being prepared for that trend is going to be a really good place to be in the years and decades to come.

E

Ed Clemente 21:52

Well, if you follow that advice, where all the unicorns are, you're giving good career advice, because it's going to be the future, is that's where the jobs are going to be if you don't create your own sort of business or entrepreneurship, right?

M

Mike Piskur 22:05

Yeah, major opportunities, absolutely.

E

Ed Clemente 22:08

Um, the last question is, I usually say for Michiganders, but you're on Lake Michigan. What's your favorite part of the Great Lakes?

M

Mike Piskur 22:15

Oh, man, that's a tough one. You know, one of the great things about this job is I've gotten to travel to so many places across the region, and just even within Michigan, I mean, I've gotten to cover a lot of estate. I'm not a Michigander but you know, I've gotten to see so much of it everywhere from Detroit to Ann Arbor to Mackinac Island. I spent a couple of weeks last summer in Pentwater. It gets pretty hard I would say probably to beat the Lake Michigan coast in Michigan. So you know, if I had to pick one, maybe that would be it. I have, also I'm fortunate to live just a couple of blocks from from the Chicago side of the lake as well. So I'm I love the lakes overall, but you know, I'm a little bit partial to Lake Michigan.

E

Ed Clemente 22:57

We appreciate that. Once again, I want to thank Mike Piskur, Program Manager for the Great Lakes St. Lawrence Governors and Premiers. Thanks again for being on the show Mike can keep up all the good work. Hope to hear more from your organization in the future.

M

Mike Piskur 23:09

Thank you Ed, I really appreciate it.

E

Ed Clemente 23:11

Next week, we have the Executive Director for the New Economy Initiative, Wafa Dinero. She has had an interesting international path with her job working with underserved small business entrepreneurs, be sure to tune in.

A

Announcer 23:26

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