

# Ep.26 - Heather Grondin

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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## SPEAKERS

Announcer, Ed Clemente, Heather Grondin



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.



Ed Clemente 00:28

Welcome to The Michigan Opportunity brought to you by the Michigan Economic Development Corporation. Hello, my name is Ed Clemente and with the MEDC and I'll be your host today. And I want to be very appreciative of the fact that we have Heather Grondin, Vice President Corporate Affairs and External Relations for the Windsor Detroit Bridge Authority. Welcome, Heather.



Heather Grondin 00:49

Thank you very much Ed.

- E** Ed Clemente 00:50  
And this is maybe our first international actually podcast, I presume you're somewhere in Canada, I would guess.
- H** Heather Grondin 00:58  
I am. I'm in Windsor, my home and happy to be your first international podcast. That's great.
- E** Ed Clemente 01:04  
Yeah, I didn't know exactly. If you were you grew up in Windsor. And sounds like you might have.
- H** Heather Grondin 01:09  
Yeah, I grew up in Windsor. I am a graduate of the University of Windsor. And I'm quite excited to be able to work on a project that will forever change Windsor's landscape.
- E** Ed Clemente 01:21  
I'll put a plug in for rugby, I used to play for University of Michigan and we would play with University of Windsor all the time. And it was always fun to go over there because it was very, they were very good. Let's say that. And anyway, let's talk a little bit about the for people that never heard of it and they'd never maybe, you know, they know a little bit about bridges but not really what do you tell people that meet you for the first time and don't know any idea what's going on?
- H** Heather Grondin 01:48  
So I tell people that I work on the Gordie Howe International Bridge, and sometimes I say, have you heard of the new bridge? That's the one I'm working on. And when they asked me what I do, I say quite simply, I talk about it a lot.
- E** Ed Clemente 02:05  
You know, and put a plug in for Gordie Howe. But I don't know who picked the name, but I know he is someone that's well known on both sides of the border and I only met him once and I was a young kid. But he was huge and very muscular. And I'm like, oh my God,

this guy must be huge on skates. But you know, I know a lot of people know who he is. And I know that that's part of your job is to help promote this bridge. So what why do you why do you tell people right away while we're building the bridge? First? I'm sure that's an early question usually.

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Heather Grondin 02:39

Yeah, you know, I do often get asked or offer up why we're building the bridge and ultimately, their were regional transportation needs that were identified. Looking at future long term capacity, looking at redundancy, you know, keeping in mind the Windsor Detroit trade corridor is the busiest commercial land border crossing between Canada and the US. Um, looking at providing system connectivity, so from highway 401, in Windsor to the I 75 in Detroit, so really providing that seamless connectivity. And then ultimately providing improved border processing. Your border processing has changed significantly over the last few decades. And so really being able to provide the most up-to-date. And technologically advanced border processing is all good news news for businesses and for commercial travelers. And that's really why we're here. That's why we're building the Gordie Howe International Bridge

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Ed Clemente 03:41

A little later might want to dive in a little bit about how this is going to be technologically more advanced say than other historic bridges. The you also come with a lot of sort of acumen from being you work at the Ontario Ministry of Transportation for like nine years, is that right? (That's right.) So you you you grew up in Windsor, but were you for Ontario but interact with the federal government, I presume as well, right?

H

Heather Grondin 04:08

Yeah, so in terms of I'll just give you a quick summary of my history. So I grew up here in Windsor have a degree from the University of Windsor in Communication Studies and a minor in Political, Political Science, eventually found my way to work in Toronto, for the federal government, in a department then called Public Works and Government Services. And while there saw a job posting for a communications position, working on an environmental assessment for a new bridge here in Windsor. Having been from Windsor, I knew how important a new bridge crossing would be and I thought, wow, what a great opportunity to come back home and contribute to something that I knew would have a lasting impact. At the time, I thought, you know, that sounds like fun. Maybe I'll do that for like a year. And that was 2005 and it's not 2005 anymore. So that job was with the Ontario Ministry of Transportation and I worked on the environmental assessment for the overall

project. So the bridge, the ports of entry, the connecting road on the Ontario side, and then ultimately focus for the next few years on the Wright Honorable Herb Gray Parkway, which is the extension of highway 401 that connects right into the Canadian port of entry and then the Gordie Howe International Bridge, and then move to Windsor Detroit Bridge Authority where I'm currently at focusing on the other four components. So I've been kicking around this project for an extremely long time.

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Ed Clemente 05:36

So the the Windsor Detroit Bridge Authority is sort of like a public private partnership, right?

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Heather Grondin 05:44

Yeah, so we are the public side of the public private partnership. What we're called is a Canadian Crown Corporation. And the US government doesn't really have an equivalent to a Canadian Crown Corporation. We are a government entity, but in many ways we function like a private sector entity. We have a board of directors, we have corporate plans that we fulfill and deliver, but we are mandated to follow government legislation. And ultimately, we are funded by the taxpayers. So we're we're a bit of a dichotomy and a bit different than what you would see in the US government. Our project, the Gordie Howe International Bridge is being delivered as a public private partnership or a P3. So we represent the public side of that partnership with Bridging North America being our private sector partner,

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Ed Clemente 06:39

Having served in the legislature, you guys also have a parliament, which is people don't understand how, like Ontario, I think is the most populated province, right of all the provinces. But you also are a little bit more. Ontario, like your federal government's not as strong as our federal government? Is it? Or is it the opposite? I forgot?

H

Heather Grondin 07:01

Um, I think it's actually the opposite. So from my understanding, if you ask government, a lot of decisions are made at the state level, and then work your way down. Ours is a little bit of the opposite. A lot of decisions are made at the federal level, and then work their way down with each province. I'm taking some of that federal direction and applying it provincially.



Ed Clemente 07:25

Yeah, and let's, let's get like, so you talked about how you did your part on your side of the border, and someone was probably doing the equivalent sort of footprint on our side, and you guys are coordinating that between the two groups.



Heather Grondin 07:39

So, historically, on the project, there were four partners working together, forming the Border Transportation Partnership, and that was on the Canadian side, the federal government under Transport Canada and the provincial government under the Ontario Ministry of Transportation. On the US side, it was a US Federal Highway Administration for the US federal government. And then the Michigan Department of Transportation at the state level. Windsor Detroit Bridge Authority, started operations in 2014. And we are actually responsible for the work on both sides of the border. So once we came on, and kind of took over the project. we oversee work on both sides. And we work in very close coordination and collaboration with the Canadian federal government, Michigan Department of Transportation, the governor's office, the border agencies, so Customs Border Protection, General Services Agency on the US side, and then the equivalents on the Canadian side. So we really, ultimately work as the convener amongst all the stakeholders who have a very significant role to play in the delivery of this project.



Ed Clemente 08:55

And there are a lot of stakeholders, I remember working through this and you have my blessings. I know that's not an easy thing to keep all those moving parts moving together sometimes, but you're doing a great job. And let's talk a little bit about where the project is. I know I drive by it, but go ahead, why don't you let the other folks know.



Heather Grondin 09:17

Right. So amazing work has been done. Over the last number of years. Construction officially started our design construction phase officially started in October of 2018. When people see the site, it's radically different than it would have been the people would have seen a 20 in the early part of 2018. The site has been cleared. Construction is well underway, you can see the bridge towers being built and formed. Ultimately, our bridge towers are going to rival the height of the tallest tower at the GM Renaissance Center. So just to give you a bit of sense of perspective, and so that work is well underway, all property needed has been acquired, the sites have been cleared. We expect building construction to really ramp up over 2022 / 2023. And ultimately, you'll, you're going to

start seeing the bridge being constructed over the river and in 2023 ish, late 2023, you're gonna see that span actually connecting,



Ed Clemente 10:23

And what kind of style of bridge is it I mean, I think I know it's different. So what is it?



Heather Grondin 10:29

Yeah, so it's a cable-stay bridge, the Ambassador Bridge is a suspension bridge. So just to give you context of the different types of bridges. The main span of the Gordie Howe International Bridge, I'm going to say this in meters, I apologize, I'm going to use metric



Ed Clemente 10:47

No, it's okay, we should know meters,



Heather Grondin 10:48

it's 853 meters (932 yds). And that is the longest main span of any cable-stay bridge in North America. So we're going to have the honor of really being the longest cable-stay bridge in North America. And it's probably around the fifth longest in the entire world.



Ed Clemente 11:05

So with that, obviously, now that we know where the progress is, you sort of touched on this a little bit that we're the number one border crossing for North America, Canada in the US. But can you give us a few more statistics? I think people don't really realize how much traffic goes back and forth, not just in the Detroit area. But I mean, that border of Michigan in general with Ontario.



Heather Grondin 11:29

Yeah, so I don't have the the full number of all the trade all the traffic movement between Ontario and Michigan. About 25% of Canada's land trade comes through the Windsor Detroit corridor, and then reverse as well. There are about 16 states that are Ontario's number one trading partners, all of whom the traffic moves through this corridor between Windsor and Detroit. And then likewise, there's probably about a dozen states that see Ontario as their number one trading partner. And that trade moves through via trucks through these border crossings here in Windsor, Detroit, and also through Sarnia. So it is a

very, very busy corridor. The Windsor trade corridor is the busiest anywhere between Ontario and the bordering states. And I think number wise, these are pre-pandemic numbers, but I believe they're between 8 to 10,000 trucks moving through the corridor on a daily basis.

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Ed Clemente 12:39

And I think it's one of the bigger you might have said this, but when the bigger crossings internationally to0?

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Heather Grondin 12:45

Yeah, right. It is it is a very, on the international scale, very, very busy in terms of numbers, not just the numbers of trucks, but the volume and the value of the trade that's moving across the border.

A

Announcer 13:00

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Ed Clemente 13:15

So what is the value to some of the entrepreneurs on both sides of the river here? What would you be gosh, if you could talk to some of them directly? What would you be kind of suggesting to them to be started looking at opportunities?

H

Heather Grondin 13:29

Yeah, so so there's two ways to look at opportunities. There are opportunities right now. So during this design build phase that we're currently in, overall, our our contract with Bridging North America will see the bridge opening by the end of 2024. And that's what we're continuing to work toward. So over these years that are leading to 2024 there are a number of contracts to be awarded, focusing on many, many different aspects of construction, many, many different aspects of services to be provided, goods to be provided. So it's really thinking about what what a construction project that is not just a road, you know, people always focus on the bridge part. It's not just about the bridge. There are major buildings to be constructed, paving to do within the ports of entry, landscaping that needs to be done, food that needs to be provided to the workers. So it's

really, you know, thinking about how big this construction project is and all the services that are needed. I do want to say that we do promote all the opportunities that are available on the website, [gordiehoweinternationalbridge.com](http://gordiehoweinternationalbridge.com). But then stepping outside of the construction phase, I really encourage people to think about operations. This is a new major piece of infrastructure and coming with this major piece of infrastructure that will be an operation 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. There are opportunities coming with that, increased mobility, the ability for people to move their goods between Detroit and Windsor so much more easily. Thinking about the tourism opportunities that are going to be made available by having this new bridge. The bridge includes a multi-use path for pedestrians and cyclists. This is something that we heard from community members on both sides of the border that was so important to them. So we included it. It's going to be toll free for pedestrians and cyclists. We need people to start thinking about what tourism opportunities are available to people who want to have that very unique experience of walking across or riding across the longest cable-stay bridge in North America. So there's a lot there.

E

Ed Clemente 15:52

Yeah, I didn't mean to cut you off. But I know that is there other sort of benchmark bridge you guys are looking at to give you ideas of where this has been successful, somewhat.

H

Heather Grondin 16:03

We have looked at a few and we will be over, as we're working toward that opening date, having discussions with community members and stakeholders and looking at other bridges that operate this way, to determine some of our own policy considerations. You know, I get asked a lot, will the multi-use path be open 24 hours a day? Will I be able to bring my dog across? Um, you know, like those types of questions. And they say the same thing. If your dog has papers, maybe you can come across. You know, so there's still a lot of those policy considerations. And this is where people who have that entrepreneurial spirit and can look ahead would be great opportunities for them to get involved and have their voice heard so that we can integrate any of those concepts into some of those future policy decisions.

E

Ed Clemente 16:56

And let's, just real quick, if you could give sort of like what is going to be the technological advantages, because you've been able to observe under this COVID era, and how things are slowing down or moving faster. So what types of things will be I know, there's, what's it called? What's the pass you can use it? I seen it the tunnel. (NEXUS?) Yeah. So yeah, things



like that or...

H

Heather Grondin 17:18

There there will be things like that. So one, one approach that we've taken, and that we've taken this from very early days, is we've been working with the border agencies since day one, with Canada Border Services with US Customs Border Protection, to really learn from them to build their requirements in from day one, so that we know what their latest legislation and requirements are, so that we make sure that that's reflected in what we're delivering. On top of that we have been discussed having discussions with trucking associations, and to ask them what is important to you? What we've heard over and over again, is trip time repeatability. So we want to know exactly how long it's going to take us to get from point A to point B using your bridge. What can you do to help us with that. And so some of those considerations, we built it straightaway into the design. So you're going to see things like dedicated lanes for vehicle for passenger vehicles and dedicated lanes for commercial vehicles. That's something that we heard was a priority. We have the ability, we call them high low booths. So those are booths that can be for vehicular traffic, for passenger traffic, for example, if it's a busy passenger day, they'd be very easily converted to be able to process commercial vehicles, if it's a heavier commercial day. We have the ability we have the ability to move trucks over to the side on the bridge without impacting the movement of traffic, because there are such things as truck breakdowns. We'll be able to manage hazardous material or dangerous goods. So all of these kind of concepts that will allow for that continuous movement have been integrated from day one. And I think that's really what's going to help.

E

Ed Clemente 19:11

Yeah, I know that supply chain logistics, and especially with this era of like maybe autonomous vehicles to a degree it's all going to be, but it sounds like it's an open source thing that's going to be something that constantly adapts as circumstances adapt. So.

H

Heather Grondin 19:26

Yeah, definitely. And we have been having discussions about autonomous vehicles and where that technology is heading. You know, even though we're under, we're in construction, that doesn't mean we're done having those conversations, we need to see where those types of technologies are heading. So we can determine how and when importantly, to integrate the ability to accommodate those into the bridge. Alright, the last couple of questions but sure, last, why I don't want you to rush through but I know it's important is community benefits, those kinds of things. I know both of both sides of the

bridge are having to work with communities and unique ways. And if you could maybe just mentioned that a little bit. Sure. So this project includes a community benefits plan, it was a very important component of the project built into our project requirements, again, from day one. Ultimately, the approach that we took was to include two components to community benefits. A workforce development side, which is all about providing opportunities and engagement for local businesses and local workers to have an opportunity to, to participate in the economic opportunities of the project. And the second approach is the neighborhood infrastructure strategy. And that strategy sees \$10 million on the US side and \$10 million on the Canadian side, invested in community betterments. We have worked very closely with community members on both sides to figure out exactly how to spend that \$10 million. So that \$10 million is a reflection of what the community members had said is the most important things to them. So things like home repair programs on the in Delray, Southwest Detroit, and things like park improvements on the Canadian side. The two programs are a little bit different, because they needed to reflect the two communities on the both sides on both sides of the border. And ultimately, we've received very positive feedback to the approach to community benefits, we will continue to deliver those through through the opening of the bridge. And we do continue to get feedback from people and we want to see how that plan is actually creating measurable benefits for people.



Ed Clemente 21:48

Well, and then just like you said, earlier, we can it's like something that will adapt as you guys move through the process, because communities change all the time themselves, too. So you got to be prepared for a lot of different options.



Heather Grondin 22:01

Yeah, that's exactly right.



Ed Clemente 22:02

Yeah. So this is just a mini question for you. But if you are thinking about people who are because you're doing international commerce here, what kind of careers would you recommend somebody to get into? Anything you'd suggest?



Heather Grondin 22:16

Yeah, well, I mean, given my background, I always promote people pursuing communications, I can tell you, when I was a university student, studying communication

theory, I never anticipated working on a \$5.7 billion construction project. So you really never know where a job in that field would take you. I'm certainly in looking at the workforce at Windsor Detroit Bridge Authority, we have engineers, we have people in finance, we have people in human resources, all of whom have joined because they're excited and inspired by the project. And and really, I think what this project has been able to do is provide people to do the best that they do in their field, but all contributing to one end goal. And that end goal is getting this bridge open and getting people to use it.

E

Ed Clemente 23:10

Well, you know, think about career-wise, it's a real landmark and legacy for you to always say you worked on it, and it's a great opportunity. And the last question is pretty easy. But what do you like best when better times but the the advantages of living on an international border, especially growing up in Windsor, and by the way, my godmothers from LaSalle, so so I'm pretty used to going over to Canada quite a bit but like what do you like best about this Detroit Windsor? Just even you know where we live?

H

Heather Grondin 23:41

Yeah, you know, I love living in a border town. It's, it's the exposure and the opportunity to, to just have so much available to us at any one time. You know, crossing a crossing the border to go to a Tigers game or a Red Wings game, it's really not that big of a deal. For us in Windsor, we just grab, you grab your passport, you take the tunnel bus over, and you're able to go and be just exposed to, to so many more opportunities than maybe necessarily what we have here in Windsor. And then the reverse is true as well. One of the very best parts of my job is that I get to talk to people I get to meet so many different people have so many different discussions. And over the last six years of working at Windsor Detroit Bridge Authority, people have told me about their experiences on the Detroit side coming over to visit Windsor and to hear what they found valuable and what they found interesting. And it's even opened my eyes to some of those benefits and opportunities that I've lived with. I'm not gonna say how old I am, but that I've lived with for many, many years, and then the same is true just being exposed to new things on the Detroit side. I do have to say, what's something I miss with the current border closure is churros I, you know, I miss going to Mexicantown Bakery and getting amazing churros. When I cross again, that's probably where I'm going to go first.

E

Ed Clemente 25:18

Everyone's got their first thing they want to go to, we didn't even touch on too, how many people work on both sides of their two? I mean, you don't have to comment on this. But I

know a lot of nurses who are friends of mine that live in the Windsor that work at American hospitals and medical fields and, you know, some other time we can get to where that's going to also sort of be a splash for the economy on both sides with, you know, additional redundancy crossings. Um, but yeah, so anyway, maybe we'll have you back on again, maybe as progress moves along, right?

**H** Heather Grondin 25:50  
I'd be happy to come back.

**E** Ed Clemente 25:51  
Yeah, no, no, no, it's been great. And once again, our guest was Heather Grondin, Vice President of Corporate Affairs and External Relations for Windsor Detroit Bridge Authority. Thanks again for Heather for doing this, this was fun.

**H** Heather Grondin 26:03  
Thank you Ed.

**A** Announcer 26:05  
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