

S2.E2 - Randy Thelen

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SPEAKERS

Announcer, Ed Clemente, Randy Thelen

- 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, I'm your host today Ed Clemente. And we're glad to have an old friend of mine, Randy Thelen. He's the president and CEO of The Right Place. Welcome to the show, Randy.
- R** Randy Thelen 00:38
Thank you Ed, great to be here. Although old friend?
- E** Ed Clemente 00:41
Well, I'm a lot older than you, let's say that. We've known each other awhile.
- R** Randy Thelen 00:45
We have, we have, its great to see you again.
- E** Ed Clemente 00:47

Yes. And you know, The Right Place, congratulations, you're our first guest we've had twice from now. We had Birgit prior before you. And she was such a great person to work with when I was in the legislature and I know you got big shoes to fill, but I hear you're doing a great job. What do you tell people The Right Place is, when you first meet them and they've never heard of it before?

R

Randy Thelen 01:11

Yeah, well, well, thanks Ed, and great to be here and it's nice to have The Right Place represented twice on your show. And certainly, you're right Birgit has, you know, tremendously big shoes to fill. But I think of it a little bit differently, I think of as taking the baton and continuing the race. And we're we're thankfully, because of her work, in a great strong position in the front of the pack. But we got to keep running, we got to keep racing as a region. And for us at The Right Place, we are the leading economic development organization serving West Michigan. And you know, it's centered right here in Grand Rapids. And there's a lot of great attributes about the region, we've got a very strong public private partnership kind of mindset here, we've got a very diversified economy. Our work is to continue pushing forward making sure we diversify even further so we're that much more resilient. Now that that resiliency of the economy across the country and around the world has really been put to the test during the course of the pandemic. And it's been exciting to see in a lot of ways how the economy has recovered so quickly, and we think there's, there's, frankly, more room to grow going forward.

E

Ed Clemente 02:12

Yeah, and you're a real journeyman, and I mean that as a compliment. The way I'm gonna just tell people, like one of your early mentors, who was a friend of mine, and my family's, you know, was Bill Morris, and why don't you kind of yeah, why don't you touch a little bit about how you got started with economic development? I think you had a job before him even, I think.

R

Randy Thelen 02:33

I did. You know, I studied economics when I attended Alma College. I have an econ degree and so I'm, I always tell people, I'm an economist at heart. I ventured out to New York for a master's degree, I was in a PhD. program, but decided to call it short at a master's degree and ventured back into economic development. I had an internship when I was at Alma and then built it into a career where I sit here in Grand Rapids today. But you're right, Bill Morris, wonderful man, just incredible heart and passion for the state and for Monroe County, or as he called it, Monroe County. And worked there in the late 90s, when it was really sort of the heyday of the SUV movement in the auto industry. And working down in Monroe between Toledo and Detroit at that time was an exciting time to really cut my teeth in economic development. The phone rang constantly, companies were putting auto supply or kind of facilities there left and right. And worked there for a good stretch, but made my way to the MEDC where you're at now today. And I worked for the Michigan Economic Development Corporation for about four years in a variety of roles. And ultimately, you know, in this career, sometimes you have to move to advance and I made my way to Holland, Michigan, where I was hired as the first President of Lakeshore Advantage, which is the economic development organization serving Holland and Zeeland. And really just had a great 10-year stretch there working with some amazing people

building up a strong organization. After a while, I'll admit, my wife and I got a little bit of a adventurous streak, maybe and we decided to go out west. We ended up working in Omaha, Nebraska, where I led a regional economic development effort, frankly, very similar to The Right Place. I worked there for five years leading a strong organization, national award-winning organization while I was there. We decided to go further west and made our way to Denver, where I worked in the core of the city for the Downtown Denver Partnership. And really, you know, it's no secret Denver is one of the most robust economies in the country and to work in that environment and to see what a true high-growth market is like, that was really a great, tremendous experience and a fun, fun stretch. But then we decided when this opportunity opened up, this is home for us Ed. Michigan is home, I'm born and raised here, my wife born and raised here. In getting back home, especially in the you know, the sort of afterglow or the aftermath of the pandemic, it was important for us to bring what we've learned out of state and bring it back here in West Michigan, and that's what we've been doing for the last year and look to do it for years to come.

E

Ed Clemente 04:59

Where did you and your wife go to high school? Just as a curious note?

R

Randy Thelen 05:03

Well, we met at college we met at Alma College. So she was born and raised in Mount Pleasant, Michigan. I was born and raised just north of Lansing in a small town of Fowler, Michigan.

E

Ed Clemente 05:11

Ah, okay. I always like to know where people come from, it's amazing how big the state is and how many people come from all over the place.

R

Randy Thelen 05:18

Oh, yeah, yeah. and Fowler is one of those classic Michigan, small towns, maybe 30 minutes north of Lansing. Most people either worked for one of the, you know, for General Motors, they work for the State of Michigan, maybe the university, or they worked on a farm and that was sort of the makeup of the town.

E

Ed Clemente 05:33

And we should put a plug in to matted for Jennifer Owens at the Lakeshore Advantage. She was also on one of our shows, and she's doing a great job there as well. I know you guys work together on projects, as she did with Birgit right?

R

Randy Thelen 05:44

Oh, absolutely. And Jennifer's a great example of taking the baton and running even further and faster to the front. So terrific, terrific partner.

E

Ed Clemente 05:52

Yeah, and let's focus a little bit about, you touched on this a little bit, but, you know, you guys been going pretty strong throughout the last few years, you want to kind of give a recap a little bit?

R

Randy Thelen 06:05

Yeah, you know, I think like most markets, 2020 was a real challenge from a, the pandemic really put a lot of decision making on hold and so we had a lot of pent up demand for project work and really exceeded all of our goals for this past year, really, across the board. So that was it was fun to see in the first year, sort of in this seat to see the team, pick up the pace, deliver on some projects, and ultimately deliver on the metrics. So we're seeing a wide array too, Ed, of the types of projects. You know, historically, West Michigan has been a manufacturing hotbed, that continues. We had defense projects, aerospace projects, med device projects, and even some automotive supplier projects this last year. We also had technology, we also had engineering, we also have design types of projects, so a real diverse mix of opportunities come forward this last year. And as we head into 2022, we see that pace continue to pick up. We have five project announcements will see take place before the end of February. So good job growth opportunities. So we're leaning into it pretty aggressively. We visited with more companies last year than we've ever visited before. Really, you know, especially after this sort of work from home / remote work environment, we really got in front of our clients this last year. And that's turned out to be a big move as we see that project pipeline expand.

E

Ed Clemente 06:14

And you know, you also got a compliment from a good friend of mine, you might know Dale Robertson. [Sure] He runs the Grand Rapids Museum, I think, [wonderful man] but the thing he said to me is, we used to work in the Senate together, way back, but but he said, you know, the one thing you've got going for you and he thinks it's because of what you've done outside the state of Omaha, and Denver especially, how important talent is. And he thinks you got a different sort of brand that I think needs to be like sort of the future of economic development a little bit.

R

Randy Thelen 07:57

Well, that's a that's a big brand to carry. But I do think, I will tell you, I do feel heading out of state getting some different exposure and a different experience has helped me tremendously coming back. I mean, I think my time at Lakeshore Advantage served me really well, and I could have maybe stepped into this role. But I think having ventured out, and worked you know, Omaha is a market very similar to Grand Rapids. It's about a million in population, credible business, you know, public sector, private sector partnership kind of approach there

too. And to see how and really lead that organization into this talent sort of push was really instrumental in framing out the way I think about our work going forward. And then Denver was just sort of Omaha on steroids where you know, Ed one person moved to the Denver Metro every 42 minutes of every hour of every day for the three years I was there. I mean, it's I saw more homes get built in my three years there than than I that I believe I've seen in my entire life. So the type of growth they're experiencing is truly extraordinary. So I've got to find a way to take that experience and that exposure and bring some elements, the positive elements, here to West Michigan. And so we've recrafted our strategy at The Right Place around three big pillars of people, place and prosperity. I think it all starts with people or as you say, talent, if we're not putting people at the focal point of our strategy around economic development, we're missing the boat. We don't do the groundbreaking, we don't do the ribbon cuttings because the buildings are cool, although I do love buildings. We do it because they ultimately get filled with people in tremendous jobs that help advance themselves and advance their families. So we have we have I think, by framing us first around people I think puts us in the right frame of mind. And then the second pillar is place and placemaking. Building communities that are attractive and magnetic for talents, it retains talent and attracts talent to the market. And strangely, in a in a work from home kind of remote work kind of world, I think place matters more now than ever. People who have the choice to live now anywhere in the country or the world, for that matter, are not choosing, forgive me Ed, but they're not choosing places that suck. They're choosing places that really are thriving and dynamic and interesting. And we've done a lot of good work in placemaking in West Michigan over the last 20 years, but we have to double down because of the Denvers and the Nashvilles and the Austins of the world, they're not letting up on the accelerator, they're pushing forward. We have to keep pace and then some to be one of those those, you know, dynamic growth markets in the country. And if we get people dialed in, if we get placemaking, dialed in, then the prosperity piece, what people might think of traditional economic development, the jobs, the investment, the wages, that prosperity piece of our strategy gets a whole lot easier when the talent and the community pieces are, are in a groove and really working. So that's our strategy going forward. And that's where we spend our time each and every day.

E

Ed Clemente 10:51

Well, it's interesting, and I don't know if you've ever read this book, but it's called Jumpstart America. And it's a really good book, but they mentioned potentially six, like, tech hubs for the future that are non-traditional kind of cities. And you guys are mentioned as one, like your Wyoming / Grand Rapids area, that that's what they said. But you know, it's other places, maybe like Kalamazoo, too, and but I mean, it was interesting, because Michigan, I think was either tied for first for the most opportunities for tech hubs. And I think the tech hubs, to me, that language, is not the big mega cities, almost, it's sort of like that in-between kind of cities almost.

R

Randy Thelen 11:32

Well, we've seen it sort of migrate out of Silicon Valley over the last five to ten years. When I when I was in Denver, in the three years I was there, 92 Silicon Valley companies chose to locate in the heart of downtown. [Wow] And that's one every 10 days practically. So it's it's migrating out of Silicon Valley. Right now they're going to Nashville, Salt Lake City, Austin, [Miami] Raleigh, Miami and Denver. The next wave is going to go beyond the NFL cities, and

they're going to move to midsize cities and that's that's where we're looking to position, West Michigan and Greater Grand Rapids. Ed we in fact, just launched a new tech sector strategy effort, where we're pulling the best and brightest minds together to think through how do we capitalize on that. Today, our employment's 5% in tech sector. Our peers like Indianapolis, Cincinnati, Columbus are in that 7% to 9%. Our goal is to double to 10% of between now and 2035. So over the next 10 to 15 years, it's going to take a lot of work, it's going to take a lot of effort, but ultimately, that's where our young people want to work. That's where people, that's how we're going to help on that whole talent piece. If we have the type of job opportunities young people have, they're going to stay here and really prosper here.

E

Ed Clemente 12:48

Yeah. And I mean, it's like you said, manufacturing's still pretty critical, obviously to the state, but the tech sector, it's when you talk about tech, it's also you're really saying people, not just college educated, but highly skilled jobs, that bring a ton of other sort of ripple effect with it too.

R

Randy Thelen 13:07

Well, we forget that tech companies have all aspects of business. So when I was in Omaha, LinkedIn opened up a small outpost. They had a data center to start, then they put a little sales office, little marketing office, and pretty soon, they now have 1,000 people working in an office on the edge of the city. You know, we would love to have 1,000 people from LinkedIn working here in Grand Rapids. But we have to, we have to start, we have to get that ball rolling. We have a great group of tech companies today that serve, to your point, serve the industrial base here. As we think about Industrial Internet of Things as we think of Industry 4.0, all of it speaks to our manufacturing base being more tech enabled and tech empowered. We want companies that are crafting and designing and coding that technology, not just deploying it. So that's where we're really leaning in and getting aggressive.

E

Ed Clemente 13:58

Yeah, and you know, and another thing we talked about a little in the pre-call is that our new CEO, Quentin Messer, he's really helping stimulate that sort of spark for the whole state. And I know you've noticed it, too and you had some nice things to say about him.

R

Randy Thelen 14:13

Ya know, Quentin is world-class and you know, he too brings some outside perspective into the into the Michigan economy and the Michigan economic development effort and big and bold and aggressive sort of thinking. He likes the sports metaphors and I think, you know, the SEC, we all know they won the championship again the other night. They play a different brand of football that's very aggressive, very fast, very bold, and that's kind of how he's modeling the state's economic development effort. We have, sometimes we forget this Ed, and I probably I appreciate it more coming back having been out of state for a while. But we have tremendous tremendous assets here in Michigan that we sometimes take for granted. But our our

community college infrastructure is second to none. Absolutely second to none. Some of our high school career tech programs, the Intermediate School District career tech programs are exceptional, second to none. I'm meeting with one of our local public schools, they just passed a bond issue for a \$20 million career tech center facility, it's going to be spectacular. Those are, that's the type of infrastructure that you don't find in many states, particularly as you go sort of west of the Mississippi. So we have great assets, Quenton has got this great edge to him. He's you know, bold and unafraid as he goes forward and selling Michigan and we're glad to be a partner of his and of the MEDC.

A

Announcer 15:32

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E

Ed Clemente 15:49

Before we move on, is there any other sort of stakeholders or partners that you would mention that maybe we wouldn't think about, but maybe ones you work with all the time?

R

Randy Thelen 15:59

You know, of late, we've always been great partners with our utilities, whether it's Detroit Edison, on the east side of the state Consumers Energy is the large stakeholder here on the west side of the state. They've always been great economic development partners, but it's been interesting, since I've been back to see how they've really begun to step up their game. For the first time we have an economic development rate for electricity in the state that was a collaborative effort by Detroit, Edison and Consumers Energy. And I think that speaks to their their desire to help push Michigan forward and help push our growth forward. So what I see happening right now, and I think some of this is coming out of the pandemic, where there's this natural tendency now for us to pull together. And I think we've seen that in the economic development ranks, whether it's Quentin's leadership at the MEDC, or folks like Garrick Rochow at Consumers Energy, pushing forward and pulling people together.

E

Ed Clemente 16:03

Well, you're going to be surprised I only got a couple questions left for you. But, I love this question, and I know it's repeat it in almost every podcast, but I think it's really worth hearing, is kind of what advice would you give to anyone that's in high school, or maybe go back and talk to yourself while you're in high school as career advice, because I think everybody would like to go back and talk to themselves sometimes.

R

Randy Thelen 16:49

Well, I guess two things come to mind Ed if I'm talking to myself, I'd probably tell my teenage self that it's gonna be okay. Everything as a teenager seems to be bigger than life, and the end

sen that it's gonna be okay. Everything as a teenager seems to be bigger than me, and the end of the world and none of that is true. I think generally, things are gonna be okay. The second thing maybe, this is a lesson my father taught me just to say yes. Yes to opportunity, be open to opportunity, even if it's out of your comfort zone, even if it's something you might not normally, just try things, give it a shot, and say yes, and you'll find, frankly, you'll see people saying yes to your questions, which helps move things forward. And you know, you learned you learned some things you meet some people along the way by saying yes.

E

Ed Clemente 17:53

I'll give you one more chance too to say was there any disruptors or future things? I think you covered a lot of them, but is there anything else you see on the horizon maybe we should be aware of?

R

Randy Thelen 18:04

Yeah, you know, I think I think the world and the economy sort of works we think cyclical, I think it almost works like a pendulum things get up to one side then eventually it works its way back and maybe it over-corrects for a while then settles in at an equilibrium. And we're gonna be muscling our way through that over the next couple years. As the pendulum swings back, post pandemic, you know how much hybrid remains long term? You know, in the next few years, we'll see that sort itself out. People working remotely, how far away can they work remotely and still be effective without being connected to their company and that culture? So I think watching in pushing and seeing how these things evolve over the next couple years is gonna be critical. And that's that goes back to that placemaking comment. I think, place we've talked how millennials have chosen place first and then job second, I think maybe more and more people have that mindset today than ever before. And so here in Michigan, and especially us at The Right Place, our focus here in West Michigan, we need to make sure our places are wildly attractive for everybody, those early retirees the millennials and beyond that are they're making their mark we want to make sure we have a place for them to call home.

E

Ed Clemente 19:12

The, I don't know how to word this last question but do you have like you know when you came back but what did you miss most or what is there usually I just asked what's your favorite spot in Michigan but what did you kind of miss most you and your wife when you guys came back?

R

Randy Thelen 19:29

You know it was interesting this past spring we moved here March 1st, and you know first few weeks heads down completely oblivious to anything in the outside world other than work. And then suddenly one day this you know, everything started to pop in the spring and all this green. Grass was greener the trees were greener and Ed, driving home one day, it just like suddenly hit me like this is home, this is absolutely home. My daughter says the rain smells different or she says the rain hits different here. It does have a different feel. So all of that felt really comforting to come back home. The other thing that struck me and when I left about 10 years

ago, there wasn't this visible, palpable Michigan pride. And now I come back and you see people wearing it on a ball cap, you see it on a t shirt. Look at how many people have the Michigan decal on their back windshield or the rear window of their of their car, it's it's everywhere. There's this very strong Michigan pride that's developed over the last 10 years that I think we need to capture and find ways to channel that energy into some some growth opportunities for this state. People love Michigan, and we love it being back.

E

Ed Clemente 20:39

It's one of the reasons I wanted to do the podcast because as a former state legislator, I really got to see the state really well from that sort of platform. And I never really appreciated it that much until I started, I always traveled as like a tourist, but to see all the exceptional universities and colleges and small towns and everything really made me appreciate it at an older age what great state Michigan is, in general.

R

Randy Thelen 21:05

Well, we have one of the highest concentration of engineering talent in the country. We have this incredible manufacturing base and that industry and those individuals are designed around continuous improvement. Find a problem, fix it, find a problem, fix it. So we're always highlighting the problems and looking for solutions. We don't, as a culture here in Michigan, necessarily look to the things that are working well and and really trumpet those, it's just not in our nature. But having been gone 10 years coming back, that's what really stands out is just how wonderful of a state this is and tremendous assets we have.

E

Ed Clemente 21:37

Well, thank you very much for doing the show. Again, our guest today was Randy Thelen, President and CEO of The Right Place, thanks again for doing this Randy. [Oh, thank you.] Join us next week where our guests will be Frank Muller, CEO Exlterra, where he works a lot on brownfields, he's also the Swiss Honorary Consulate.

A

Announcer 21:56

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