

Jeff: Hello and welcome to this edition of Community and University, your one-stop shop and the latest on community and economic development. I'm your host, Jeffery Franklin. I'm a research assistant for the MSU Center for community and economic development. And today I'm joined by my guest Norman Christopher. How are you today, Norm?

N. Christopher: Good morning. Thank you for allowing me to join you today.

Jeff: Of course Norman is a private consultant and he sits on a number of advisory boards related to community development and sustainability and recently retired from his post as an executive director of sustainability practices at Grand Valley State University. Norm, can you tell me a bit about what you do?

N. Christopher: Sure. Um, let me go back a little bit. My Michigan journey started where I helped run a family owned business as a president and CEO and then I turned the business back over to the family and was challenged by this area of what's the next set of best practices coming to West Michigan. And so I spent some time looking at sustainability from a full triple-bottom line effect of economic, social, and environmental impact. And I was introduced to Grand Valley where I spent the last 15 years in the office of sustainability practices. And along the way, sustainability became one of the seven core values for the university. So this didn't become an activity, it became more of a culture and that allowed me to have the opportunity to work with the city of grand rapids as well. So I have this kind of like a blend of both a business and a private sector and a public sector perspective relating to sustainable development. So in the process, I was blessed with the opportunity of being on a number of boards and advisory committees like sustainability manufacturing processes for the furniture industry and then as well as in the community. And what attracted me is this growing area, social enterprise. So as I left Grand Valley, I also looked at how are we really going to solve some of these systemic issues. So that's where my journey, and it's always been a journey, not a destination, is in this area of systemic social problems. So that's where I am today and I really try to engage myself with those organizations and enterprises that where they feel I might be able to add some value. And I'm pleased to be an innovation fellow because like you, I consider myself to be in the research mode right now, but there's a lot more to come here.

Jeff: Norm is one of the MSU Center for regional economic innovations, Innovation Fellows for 2019 because in large part of his accomplishments in the past. He is working on a project for my understanding, trying to develop a playbook of sorts for the public sector for best practices and sustainable development. Can you talk a little bit about this playbook, what it entails?

N. Christopher: Sure. It really, I should say is probably an "inventory." This space is so large. Um, there were a number of surprises when I first started to go out and do some of the research. It's very complex. These social issues like affordable housing, like access to health care, education for many residents are all interconnected issues. So you can't separate them one from another. So by its nature, they're

connected and they're very systemic. So, depending upon who you would talk to as a community stakeholder, they would give you different opinions. But I had to land on something that I felt was important and I did with affordable housing that's a challenge for most communities. So as this work is, unfolded, every community is faced with those issues. So the question is could you develop a playbook or inventory of practices that can be used to do scalable, affordable housing projects wherever you are in Michigan? Cause all communities now face them, whether you're in a rural community that's attracted a major manufacturer to come in and like, where are you going to house some of your employees? Or how are you going to fix some of our urban core areas? So that's the space that I got into. And so the first question is, what are tools for economic development that most developers, including cities, community stake holders, and I should say that the group is large cause foundations participate as well as NGOs. So they're getting the right mix of stakeholders. That's very important. And then number two is what are they currently using? So there are a number of economic development programs, primarily federally funded, and those include debt as well as tax incentives and they're fairly well known. So I first had to get an inventory of what those look like and then, now there are an emerging set of tools. Some of those tools are areas like opportunity zones, a impact investing. So the question is if you took a good project that had the fundamental economic development tools and then asked the question, could I make a good project better with the use of some of these newer tools? That is where the energy started to flow in the community because they're being used by other communities. And so that's what kind of gotten me into the space. It's like, okay, what's that inventory? And that's kind of been the journey that I've been on to get my arms around that inventory first, just to create awareness to those in the public sector that they're available to use.

Jeff: You talked about how this is such a large and emerging field. Is that becoming an obstacle for this? Like how does one person, or just, I dunno, two people or however many people that have been helping with this project work on this alone?

N. Christopher: Well, I probably have now reached out cause I tried to get the stakeholder groups in there, probably at least 10 or 12, uh, areas that are stakeholder groups. And then go ask them a basic set of questions like, what are your obstacles? Do you have enough resources to get the project done? Are you hearing all the voices that you should have regarding the project? And that's an interesting one too. And then the question sort of becomes like, well, whose responsibility is it in the first place to solve these problems? So those are obstacles from the beginning, but there's a pathway that's leading to success through them. Now, uh, another, uh, difficulty is terminology. So when you use things like impact investing, which is used on that might mean environmental impact. It could mean social impact. So you actually have to unpack some of the terms to put them in a laymen or marketplace so that they're well understood. So part of the work, uh, Jeff has to be an understanding fundamentally of what these terms mean. So that was a little bit of a challenge and an obstacle, that I,

um, that I saw the, the other piece that's in there and the challenge, uh, becomes one should do the inventory. Um, there's a, there's another piece that's going to be how do you actually make them work. And so my first challenge and obstacle was how could you create just an awareness in this space about the tools today? And so that's what this first work in the research will entail.

Jeff: Do you wanna tell me a little bit about like, what your presentation at the summit is kind of geared towards, like, you know, briefly.

N. Christopher: Well, you know, community members can actually help with this. So I'm, I am available and, I'm can certainly add some emails that are out there. I'm also on LinkedIn, but I'd really like to know for those that are in the communities today, whether it's from large cities, small cities, rural, you know, what are those pressing issues regarding social impact that you're facing? In some areas it might be healthcare, more importantly than anything or access. So part of that is an opportunity to ask the question of which of these areas are most important. Secondly, is do you have enough resources to get the project work done? In other words, financing tools. And so that's... and then another question is related to that that I think is important is does your community miss the access to some basic services that it needs? So those are ways that anybody in the community can feel that they can participate in this project. So given that, what I've tried to do in this presentation that the upcoming summit is to try to drill down on, first of all, where is the problem? And I have to tell you that the problem is a bit greater than I expected. One thing that's out there that everyone in Michigan can reference is ALICE and ALICE stands for Asset Limited Income Constrained, Employed. And so that can describe qualitatively and quantitatively how these issues fit into different counties just in Michigan. So I'd go drill down a little deeper just for Grand Rapids. Besides having that framework, can I get down into some specific neighborhood responses? And I've been able to do that, but that's a first piece. And then the question that will flow from that is where are the resources today? And I mentioned some of the economic development tools, but I think another important discussion which we'll get into, what are the available sources of capital? And I think we don't spend enough time looking at those, but they're probably 12 or 13 that you can look at besides financial capital that everybody goes to first. So I always go to the area that I understand we all need financial capital, but what else is out there to use in conjunction with, and then we'll get talking about impact investing, you know, talk a little bit more about where are the opportunities. And we'll do some examples of some of these affordable housing projects that really I would call mixed-use multi-income type projects. There are a bit more complex but they can actually provide greater economic impact. And then we'll kinda like wind up with some key success factors that people have mentioned to me when you do these kinds of projects. So, it's very pragmatic. This is kind of like where I came from writing the first book I did on sustainability best practices for businesses. This one sort of fits my pragmatic mode of, tell me really what works. And so that's been where I've tried to focus this presentation just to create awareness of what works.

Jeff: You mentioned how community members can get involved in a practical way. How should they do that? Should they reach out to you or

N. Christopher: Have them come here and you can forward them along. But the reason why I really think that inputs important, you could look at the city of Grand Rapids and say, fine, I'm part of that. But then you drill down to Kent County and that's 650,000 kind of people or you can get into a neighborhood or a rural community. All of those have these issues. Yeah, I haven't had the time to go out to do all that work. So my question is if those are pressing issues, I'd like to know about them. And maybe affords you as some things to look at and consider for doing this most important work moving forward. So I think there's some give back here too.

Jeff: So how would they go about reaching out to you? What is, how can they best reach you?

N. Christopher: Well, I guess you could look at LinkedIn. My profile's up there, but um, you could use my, uh, uh, my current email, um, one at Grand Valley that you can use is Chris, chrisfn@gvsu.edu. Even though I'm retired, I still will have that email. And I still do a number of work, so it's not too hard to get in contact with me or you could drop something off here, but I really would like to know your input.

Jeff: I think those are all the questions we have for you today. I want to extend the Michigan State University Center for regional economic innovation's thanks to Norman Christopher, you have been an absolute pleasure to have. If you'd like to hear more about Norman Christopher's project, you can read about it on the MSU REI website, reicenter.org under current projects. He will also be presenting at our summit, our innovate Michigan Summit on August 29th. You can register to attend the summit also on Reicenter.org. That is Thursday, August 29th. There will be a reception after all the presentations. There will be a breakfast and a box lunch. So it is a great deal and we would love to have you there. Thank you again, Norman. It was an absolute pleasure.

N. Christopher: Enjoyed being with you this morning. Thanks Jeff.