

Alexa Wutt: This is Alexa Wutt from Michigan Sea Grant at the National Working Waterfront Symposium in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Today is May 16th, 2018. So, Dave, if I could have you please state and spell your name, share your occupation and town, and today's date.

Dave Alexander: Dave Alexander, A-L-E-X-A-N-D-E-R. I'm the executive director of Downtown Muskegon Now from Muskegon, Michigan. Today's date is May 16th, 2018.

AW: So, to start off, what is your working waterfront story?

DA: My community is on the shores of Lake Michigan. We are sort of midpoint between the border of Indiana and Michigan with the Upper Peninsula or the Straits of Mackinac. We're eighty miles across Lake Michigan from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. We're a county of about 172,000 people. We are the largest deep water port on our side of Lake Michigan in the state of Michigan. We are also the largest urban community along that waterfront. Also, as we look at it, the second largest county along that waterfront. I think John Allen spoke of it in the preliminary session yesterday, the keynote, that we are defined by our water. We share water with everybody else in the Lake Michigan basin. But what is unique to Muskegon is Muskegon Lake and that really defines us. We have twenty-seven miles of waterfront on the coast of Lake Michigan, towering dunes, great sugar sand beaches. Of that, about eight miles are publicly accessible through state, local, and township parks. But it really starts to define us as a community and why Muskegon is where it's at, is because of Muskegon Lake. That is a five-mile by three-and-a-half-mile lake that is the extension of the Muskegon River, which starts in the middle of the state of Michigan at Houghton Lake. That lake has been our working waterfront. Our first work was for trading with the French. Our second work was the mainly Irish and British tree cutters who came in, the lumberjacks and our lumbering era. When we cut all the trees and they went away, there were two gentlemen, Mr. Hackley and Mr. Hume, who remained along in our community to launch the industrial era. We spent \$100 per job to bring people out of the Upper Midwest, mainly Chicago, to bring in paper, to bring in metals, and to bring in engine building and also bowling and billiards. So, companies like Sealed Power, Brunswick, and what eventually became S.D. Warren and the Sappi Paper Company, were sort of the foundation for our next working waterfront, which was industrial. We destroyed, I can only say the word our habitat, with that industry. It was heavy. There was a gray iron foundry that had five thousand people working in it, and they made big engine blocks before and right after World War II. We were not environmentally conscious. We were not environmentally sensitive. We didn't know what the environment was except that it was a place to dump. So, about twenty-six percent of the surface area of the natural Muskegon Lake was filled first by the lumbering era when there were twenty-seven lumber mills. Wood would be brought down the Muskegon River to Muskegon Lake, cut in those mills, put on schooners in the late 1800, and taken to Chicago. Built much of Chicago and our neighboring communities after the great fire. So, we put all the spoils of the lumber era along our shoreline. Then we started to put foundry sand out. Foundries came to Muskegon because of the great quality of the sand that was there. So, we removed something called Pigeon Hill, and now half of it is still under developed. The other half is about three hundred or two-fifty-unit condominium complex, very much bringing another type of wealth to our community. So, after the industrial era and we started to close down the plants, they were going to Mexico, they were going to Asia, other southern states in the United States. Those jobs and that work left us in a very bad situation. We are a Rust Belt city

from that standpoint. We created basically a quality-of-life strategy that used our waterfront in ways that work for us as a community. So, that whether it was from the first initial French traders that came in through somebody who's coming in to be in our community because they want to retire there, the water has defined us and why we're where we're at.

Kaitlyn Clark: Very cool.

AW: So, what makes this working waterfront important to your community? I think you touched a little bit on that.

DA: It's the economic vitality of the community. Of the five cities and three suburban townships that ring it of Muskegon, that's about 120,000 people. It is based upon being there or their ancestors came there because of the water and of the industries that it spurred. So, it is deep into our identity. I was the business editor and government reporter for about thirty-four years for *Muskegon Chronicle* and *MLive*. In 2013, we wrote a series of stories over the course of the year as we were launching our digital product *MLive.com*. That we wrote about the identity or how Muskegon Lake defined us. It is economic, but it is also spiritual, quite truthfully. We are linked to our water and it may be through fishing. It may be through recreational boating. It may be through sailing. It could be in the businesses that we operate. It could be in the water that we extract from Lake Michigan and provide to our industries. It could be in the way that we clean up that water through our wastewater management system, where we used to directly discharge into Muskegon Lake. Became an area of concern with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. It is now being cleaned up. We're probably about two or three years away from having that onus lifted from us and becoming delisted as an area of concern. Because we have taken our wastewater affluent out to the middle of the county, east of the lake, and spray irrigated it on corn fields. It's a natural filter. That natural filter then collected in drains below those corn fields and go back into the Muskegon River. So, there is a loop cycle of taking that water resource and reusing it and doing better for it. So, that really is what is the importance. Again, everything evolves around the water even though you may not know it in your daily life. If there's a storm coming, the traffic jam is down at the beach because everyone wants to watch the storm come in off the lake. So, it's what we're about.

AW: So, what are some present-day challenges and successes you have seen with this waterfront?

DA: The challenge is brownfield redevelopment. It is the legacy of not really the lumber era, but the industrial era. So, it's heavy metals and PCBs and all the other nasties that the environmental, planners and those who are surveying and researching our sites. So, as we take a large chunk, and it's in terms of tens of acres of waterfront, and then check to see what the fill was and what was left there from the industrial era when we were not environmentally conscious about what was going on. Trying to figure a way in which we can then redevelop that, be it for office or be it for recreation, be it for commercial use, or even being able to bring it to a cleanup standard that would allow for residential uses. We have been very successful, but each one of those is a year, if not decades, long process. Sometimes communities get impatient and want to see results overnight. So, I guess the challenge is that you've got to take the big picture, step back, and see where we're at thirty years ago to where we're at today, and where we're going to

be at in another thirty years is going to be phenomenal. Because as we like to say in Muskegon, God is not making waterfronts anymore. We've got some of the largest expanses in the Upper Midwest of Great Lakes properties that are available with the deep-water port access. So, you can bring in the largest ship that goes on the Great Lakes is a thousand-foot freighter that was built in the Great Lakes and could not leave the Great Lakes because of the Welland Canal and unable to get into the St. Lawrence. So, those larger ships can come into our port on a common regular basis, fully loaded. So, there continues to be traditional ferry or freighter shipping transportation happening in our port. Then there is also transportation between Muskegon and Milwaukee with a high-speed ferry called the Lake Express that does three trips a day in the summer. So, there's those linkages that we still have there. But most of the new development is mixed-use water-based development that will combine commercial office, recreational, and residential. So, how we move in that transition and those environmental issues and how we can become delisted as an area of concern and we can have the water quality that we want, the shoreline habitat quality that we want, are probably the largest challenge that we have.

AW: I know Muskegon a little bit. There is a ring of previously industrial area around that lake. How are you working to reconnect the community to the waterfront?

DA: The best reconnection that we've done was converting from a recreational value standpoint, a golf course that the city of Muskegon used to own. They sold that to private development. With those funds and the grants in the city's support, we created what's called the lakeshore trail. Our lakeshore trail goes from the mouth of our river, which is Muskegon River at the far east end, which is the home of a sixty-year-old coal power plant of the consumer's energy company called the B.C. Cobb plant. That plant closed in April of 2016 and is now being decommissioned and demolished. That site will be cleared for port and warehousing and logistics purposes by the year 2020. It starts there and goes all the way through the downtown out about twelve miles to our beach, which is Pere Marquette Park. I would just need to say that I am very proud of the fact that the city of Muskegon's two and a quarter miles of Lake Michigan frontage, that is starts at the ovals, as we call it, in town at Pere Marquette Park all the way south to the end of the city line, is all owned by the city of Muskegon. It's free. It's accessible. It's beautiful and will be left in legacy for generations to come. So, that lakeshore trail, multimodal in terms of bikes, carriages, roller blades, runners, walkers, cross-country skiers, and snowshoers in the winter. That link opened up about fifteen to twenty years ago our eyes as a community of the potentiality of those properties that we never even thought about because we didn't want to get to the waterfront because it was nasty. It was inaccessible. The owners of the factories didn't want us down there. We didn't want to be down there. It was nasty. To be having those things start to transform themselves into a new mixed-use development, it opened the eyes of the investment class. It opened the eyes of the owners themselves as we started to wind our bikes through these properties, and then also of the community itself. So, it started to have a different image of itself because of that. Over the course of the last twenty years, much of the industrial properties have gone. We're to our last one with a power plant. Then there was also a mile long in one-twenty acres of a paper mill called Sappi, South African Paper Institute that closed in 2009. That is now being redeveloped into one-twenty acre, a mixed-use development called Windward Pointe. So, as we see these things start to happen, we can get up and touch them and be close to them because of the bike trail. There are some places where it's fenced off where you can't get off the trail. But each and every part of that trail has vistas or places that you can touch and experience

Muskegon Lake south shore.

KC: Pretty cool.

AW: On a more personal note, I am curious if you have a favorite memory associated with this waterfront.

DA: Wow, [laughter] a favorite memory. Let me give you a memory of my wife's. Can I share hers? She said, "Are you going to tell me about it." Yes, so I'll tell my wife Peg's story. We're from Jackson, Michigan. I came in as a very young journalist, right out of school at Central Michigan University in 1981. We got married in [19]82. So, she was coming through and she didn't start living there till about mid part of the summer of 1982. But she remembers her first time there. It was before we had the cut through of the U.S. 31 Business Route on our waterfront. So, there was an old, bumpy road. It was like a roller coaster because of the tailings from the lumber era below, but was not having a nice compact soil for a road. So, they broke up the road, it was straightened. After it was smooth, it became very much dips and dives. So, we're going over that as we come up on Western Avenue, which was the main street going down towards the west end of downtown at Western Avenue. We looked out over an industrial site. It was called the Wiener property, and it was the Wiener family's foundry supply company. Now, I would call it a junkyard, they'd call it foundry supply, fine. But it was basically probably three to four stories tall of steel wool, rustic. Now it's scrap iron of some sorts. I don't know what they were doing. Several piles. There's a little dirt road that wound in between those. What these people did with this property or why they had to feel the need over the course of decades to store there. But there was a VW microbus that was sitting out in the back from the 1960s on blocks, just sitting there. I don't know why. Next to it was a well and it had a sheen of oil on it. I don't know what it was trying to pump up out of the ground, but it was a stone's throw from the waterfront. You couldn't see the waterfront. That was her first impression of Muskegon. She's looking at me like, "Yes, we're going to get married and this is where we're going to live?" Today, that piece of property is called Heritage Landing. It is about seventeen acres of magnificent public access that the county of Muskegon acquired in 1983 through a Thelma Wiener's benevolence that she took money to then take care of her the rest of her life. But in doing so, she put in public trust with the county this piece of property. Through federal and state grants and a lot of local efforts, we've created what I would say was to be the premier festival grounds in our region in which there has been seventeen thousand people. I guess my memory of that site was watching Huey Lewis in the news at his peak back in the late [19]80s, early [19]90s, perform on the Johnson Pavilion stage at this festival grounds with seventeen thousand people watching. So, it's now home of the Michigan Irish Music Festival. It is home of the Unity Christian Music Festival. It's just a gathering place. One of the things that John or one of the speakers yesterday spoke about having within five minutes a place that you can go and commune with your waterfront and just have a break, read a book, listen to some music, eat your lunch. Just have that place where you can just get away and be with your waterfront, that's Heritage Landing for us. So, there's a nice little spit that goes out originally from the Wiener days. There's a traffic circle there and picnic pavilion and it's where our cruise ships come up. There's a cruise ship dock there now. We have ten cruise ships with about two thousand people coming for day trips in through the Pearl Mist cruise system. They come in from Chicago to Toronto and Toronto to Chicago. We're either the second or the ninth stop on that ten-stop Great

Lakes cruise. They're able to experience that as they get off. That's where Muskegon can go and just sort of take in the lake. It's within five minutes of my walk of my current office. I guess it's the Wiener property's transformation over the course of two decades to what is now Heritage Landing that puts a warm spot in my heart.

AW: Quite a success story.

DA: Yes.

AW: How do you think the National Working Waterfront Network can support you going forward in this community?

DA: I had a question in the session that I was a part of and it was on public access, in which someone who obviously had an industrial background said, "We as a community said no more industry on a waterfront. If it doesn't need to be there for water transportation, it doesn't need to be on our waterfront." That would describe all the heavy industries that were moved off and even now describes a power plant. So, there is a tension amongst those who want to have a working waterfront. I guess what I would say that the network can do is help us define what working means. For us, it's a myriad of things going on. We did a plan back in 2015 called Muskegon Lake Vision 2020. It was a community-engagement process through the West Michigan Shoreline Regional Development Commission and a number of other key partners and stakeholders in our waterfront especially looking at the south shore of Muskegon Lake, which is all within the city of Muskegon. I guess we define working as we don't have shrimp boats and lobster boats, and we have a very small, just two families that continue to fish for whitefish in Lake Michigan. So, we don't have commercial fishing. We do have a ferry, and I know that's part of the working element of it and we'll continue to have. The city at the east end of our lake has an overview or an overlay for the zoning for a plan unit development for port development. So, we envision having the aggregate of this all, hopefully roll on, roll off container traffic to Milwaukee. We looked at barge traffic to the Illinois border for entry into the Illinois River and then the Mississippi system and connecting us that way. So, there are a number of working, as it would be more defined by the network, elements to our plan. But it also includes environmental reconstruction and redevelopment of our shoreline and its habitat and its water quality. It also includes residential. It includes commercial for hotels, for restaurants. Includes office, I'll tell you an office story to finish off here. Then finally, it includes recreational. So, all those elements are what we call Michigan's destination port. It's large enough of a body of water that we can have a thousand-foot freighter with a fishing tournament and a sailing regatta going on at the same time and the cross-lake ferry going back and forth. So, there's enough room out there if we all are just patient with each other to use this large body of water to everyone's advantage. I mentioned maybe it's the direction that we're going and how it works for us. I will leave you with this story of KL Industries. It's a plastics company by a local family named the Harris'. They had four brothers that became very successful in making first off, little paddle boats out of plastic. Then they made plastic sheeting so you can use it anywhere. But they made porta-potties. So, all that is the same material. Well, they got to see, well, there are some people doing some kayaking, so they started to do kayaking. So, they were into kayaking. They were in the low end. It's one-fifty to \$300 models. They're called Sun Dolphins. You're going to find them at Meijer here in the Upper Midwest, you're going to find them at Dick's Sporting Goods, you're

going to find them at Walmart. It's the 150 buck thing that dad goes and buys and throws in the back of the truck and takes up north here in Michigan to have the kids to do something on vacation at a very inexpensive cost. They sold lots of those. They sold lots of those to the point that at the end when they sold the company a year and a half ago, it was the largest producer of kayaks in the United States. They sold to a Boca Raton company. That investment company also combined KL Outdoors as it was called, with a group out of Montreal that made the Evoke, and it was larger. So, it's three hundred to \$1,500 units of, again, plastic kayaks. They combined those two together, they created KL Outdoors, which is now the largest producer of kayaks in the world. They went and tried to find where they wanted to locate this company at even though they will continue to make plastic products and some kayaks, but mainly other storage units that you would shelve into your garage out of the same materials up in Montreal. They have located their kayaking business in Muskegon and put KL Outdoors in a place where the Lakey Foundry used to be at in a building called Terrace Point Office building. They got the second floor out on a sort of a peninsula out into Muskegon Lake, a stone's throw from downtown, right in our downtown waterfront. Have put fifty employees at the corporate end and made that their corporate headquarters. Because they can see the water, they can put their product in the water right at their doorstep so they can take clients, they can take vendors, they can take other folks out onto the Muskegon Lake during most months, not during the winter, obviously. But that connection to the water for them was very key because it made the brand statement that they wanted to make. It was a cool place for hopefully their employees in their administration, finance, sales, marketing, and development areas be able to have a nice community to live in and enjoy the recreational pursuits of kayaking and everything else that we have in our area. So, I think that really tells the story of what our working waterfront means. So, I guess I go back to your question of what the network can do. Let's make sure that we have a nice broad concept of what working is. What works for somebody in Maine or California or New Orleans may not be the same way it works for us, but we're all working towards the same thing.

AW: Agreed. I think that is a great statement to end on. So, is there anything else you wanted to add?

DA: I can't do any better than that. [laughter]

AW: Let us stop recording.

DA: I think that is it.

[end of transcript]