

Talk CNY_S1E21_Transcript

Andrew Fish 0:06

Welcome to CenterState CEO's semi monthly podcast, Talk CNY, presented by NBT Bank.

Kate Hammer 0:11

On Talk CNY you get an inside look at the people, projects and planning moving in central New York.

Andrew Fish 0:18

I'm Andrew Fish, Senior Vice President of Member and Business Experience at CenterState CEO, the region's leading business leadership and economic development organization.

Kate Hammer 0:27

And I'm Kate Hammer, business coach and member at CenterState CEO. We are your hosts for Talk CNY. Take a moment right now to subscribe in your listening app for new episodes every other Wednesday.

Andrew Fish 0:39

On this episode of our podcast, we'll speak with CenterState CEO's Ben Sio, Senior Vice President of Strategy, Policy and Planning, on how he and his team are leaning in to the unprecedented growth in the region, and developing strategies to ensure we are prepared for the opportunities and challenges ahead. Ben, welcome. Great to have you on today.

Ben Sio 0:57

Thanks for having me.

Andrew Fish 0:58

Absolutely. So then you're our Chief of Staff and Senior Vice President of Strategy, Policy and Planning here at CenterState CEO, very important part of our team. And before we get started, I wanted to just recognize that the Central New York Business Journal has you as one of the "40 Under 40" this year, and that is a a an award that we took the liberty of nominating you for while you were out on paternity leave.

Ben Sio 1:17

Despite my best efforts. Yes, yeah, I appreciate it. Yeah, two more years left. So you gotta get it done. Because I'm gonna be over the hill pretty soon.

Andrew Fish 1:24

Yeah, so we thought we thought it would be nice to get you that recognition. So well deserved. And just wanted to say congratulations first.

Kate Hammer 1:30

As Andrew said, what you do at CenterState CEO is so important. So what do you do? Tell us!

Ben Sio 1:36

It's a mystery. My wife still asked me what to do on a daily basis. And I often tell her, just don't ever ask me about what I do. Most of my job description, I think the first line of my job description is additional duties as assigned, basically means on a daily basis, are putting out fires, we're dealing with things if you didn't wake up planning to do right, but more importantly, the work of our department, you've already talked with David, you're going to talk with more of our team members thinking the coming podcast that worked for our department strategy, policy, and planning is kind of that, that glue that holds a lot of our overall work together from a obviously strategy perspective, but from a government relations perspective, from a planning perspective, and from a research perspective, we like to say at CenterState, almost everything we do is rooted somehow in empirical evidence, right? It's rooted in something that we see as a challenge in the community. It's rooted in something we see as an opportunity, or it's rooted in something that we see outside the community that works somewhere else that we're saying, hey, makes sense for us to try that out here, right. And usually SPP strategy, volume policy and planning is the group that helps bring that in and introduce that to the work that we do. So we're able to take the high level data, and actually connect it into the conversations that we have on hundreds of times a week with companies, with stakeholders, with job seekers with everybody in the community.

Andrew Fish 2:54

And we take that data, and we oftentimes then pursue resources to help solve a problem or capture an opportunity. And just a few weeks ago, we had a major win major win for not just this region. But all across upstate, we received a federal Tech Hub designation. And well, I know you don't like to take credit for it. You and your team were the driving force behind getting-

Ben Sio 3:17

Part of a group of partners to help pull together-

Andrew Fish 3:20

From our perspective here at CenterState as the applicant, yes. And a lot of that work was convening partners and developing those relationships and bringing their expertise to the table. Recognize that, but why is this such an important designation? What does this do for not just us but Rochester and Buffalo and the partners that we have in this application? What does this do for us as a region?

Ben Sio 3:41

So a lot of people don't know that what was announced this Tech Hubs program to create in Upstate New York, the Smart I-Corridor, which is this group of partners between Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, also including Ithaca, collectively working on advancing the semiconductor industry, but also the smart sensing industry here in upstate New York, obviously, semiconductors, topics that I'm sure we've talked about on this podcast many times, especially the ones that I've listened to-

Kate Hammer 4:04

Oh, yeah, lots of time.

Ben Sio 4:05

All the time. But also, I don't know if we've talked much about our smart sensing industry. But actually, if you look at the Heritage and the industrial legacy of our community center, New York, and the online region really was and is a leader in, in a what we call the smart sensing industry. What does that it started at with General Electric and General Electric is not the community anymore, right? They're out. They were out in Liverpool at electronic Parkway, which is now occupied by Lockheed Martin. But essentially New York 70 years ago was the home of radar technology development. After General Electric is not here anymore. But really importantly, we've tracked the creation of new businesses and the relocation of other businesses to the community like Lockheed Martin like SRC, like Saab, like TTM. All are here because of that legacy. We have in this sensing this radar space, those company These are some of the fastest, fastest growing companies that are community, also some of the biggest manufacturers in our community. And it's not just those companies now, right, those can you can, you can track a direct link back to this kind of expertise in radar and sensing systems. But we have new companies that have grown up in the past couple of years in this space as well, JMA Wireless is a good example, hitting levels a good example, a lot of companies coming out the Genius New York program are in this larger space. And when you look at the data, and you look at the numbers, it's really an expertise of our community. But it's not just our community, that's an expert in this larger space. It's Rochester, there's assets and Buffalo, obviously, there's assets and Ithaca, with Cornell University. So what we do as part of this process, and application is figuring out ways that that existing legacy of companies that are here that are not going anywhere that are strong, that are growing, figuring out ways that they can also benefit from the growth of the semiconductor industry here in Central New York. And I can tell you, I was just on a phone call with one of them, they're super excited about it, it's great, all of them have chips like this, in their products, all of them see the benefit of being closer to the production of those chips, closer to the innovation of the r&d around those chips. So it's super exciting. It's something that really, I think, continues to put us on the map. And that's a big piece of kind of the strategy here, right is knocking up as many of these wins as possible because with with Micron, and with this announcement and future nonsense, we haven't done the pipeline, we need to reintroduce Syracuse, Central New York, to the nation. And, you know, up until a year ago, we hadn't really seen positive news stories about Central New York, in any major media source, right. But if you now go to the New York Times, or any major news source, Wall Street Journal, you go to Syracuse, the top hits are all positive economic stories for upstate New York and for the City of Syracuse, which we hadn't had in 70 years, right. It's always been something, something not necessarily positive. And, and now we're beginning to get these wins, we're beginning to reintroduce our our region and our community, to a nation into the world as a as a place where things are happening differently. And as a place where there's new opportunity for folks to, to consider relocating to consider moving in business to or to consider staying once they're here.

Ben Sio 4:06

So to that point about stacking wins as an organization, we've we've been doing that, as a region, we've been doing that in addition to tech hubs, in addition to obviously Micron and that unprecedented growth, we just had another big one in that community, we can talk about it now, which is great, even though we've been working on it for a really long time, but TTM outstanding expansion of their new facility that they're going to invest in creating hundreds of new jobs, how do you connect the dots for us on all of this right? And you started to pull on that thread a little bit as it related to tech hubs and those and those opportunities, but Micron, Tech Hubs now TTM. What are we really building here?

Ben Sio 7:47

So important to note on TTM, before Micron, TTM was and would have been the largest economic development project that we've run in the manufacturing space.

Andrew Fish 7:58

That's true.

Kate Hammer 7:59

Perspective.

Ben Sio 8:00

Which is, so we should not discredit the that announcement, right micron gets a lot of the attention. But TTM and others who I know are working on projects are, are thinking about that. And that was part of the conversation we had with TTM, when we were beginning to try to convince them to do the expense here, they could expand it anywhere. They were looking at other locations. And they really part of our pitch to them was hey, things are changing here. Things are beginning to show momentum in a positive direction. And obviously, that argument was successful. The so how does TTM fit into this larger picture? Right? And how does it fit into this kind of overall strategy we have. But there's this larger high tech industry that is all kind of working, as we were discussing earlier, working around this smart systems, smart sensors industry. But it's really a set of advanced manufacturers that all have similar expertise in their products, and then their r&d, that are doing different parts of that work here. So what TTM is doing here, TTM has been here for a while they purchased Anaren. So Anna is a company that goes back 30-40 years, don't quote me on that, but a fair amount of time. So that name should not be new to people than a TTM might be new. But they've been there for a couple of years. They have a defense industry and a commercial industry that they put here, mostly in the RF sensing space. So again, another sensor company, they already employ hundreds of people here in the community, which is fantastic. And they're they're shipping their products globally while they're adding here. And what they've chosen to add here because of or at least in part of the Micron conversation is a piece of their printed circuit board, industry or printed circuit board and substrates product line, and how that all works together. You got a chip, and the chip needs to go on to something chip goes on to a printed circuit board. The substrate is that green stuff that is on every single board right that you open up your TV, you drop your computer, you drop your phone, you're gonna see a circuit board. And now for the first time in our community, we have chip production. We have substrate production, we already have other companies like ICM

control I was doing printed circuit boards here in Central New York. So that now you see, not only are we beginning to have some vertical integration with companies in the radar in the sensing space, we're beginning to see horizontal integration of some of these companies that have all of these aligned products and strategies. Why is that important? It's really cool to have all these companies here, employing people doing really cool stuff that you can, you know, walk out an assembly line and see, but it's also really important for innovation. Right? So that's probably, that's probably one of the more important things for us is thinking, okay, you've got all these companies all working on complementary parts of a larger product. How can they better work together here in our community to innovate in that space, to partner to problem solve? And when you think about that, you think about these feedback loops and feedback cycle. So this is the important thing about a city. And there's a good article today talking about this, but why, over the millennia, have cities been where innovation happens. And one of the reasons there's a lot of reasons, but one of the reasons is, because you put people close together, you have these, some people call them collisions, unintended collisions, maybe that's not the right word. But effectively, if you're putting a lot of smart people in relatively close proximity, they are organically or naturally going to interact with each other and begin to problem solve on a variety of things. And that's what a city has done for years, right cities does. They do a lot of other things. But that is one of the main economic inputs of a city. And now we have all of these companies here in the radar space, and printed circuit boards, bass in the chip space, but also in the surrounding supply chain for all those folks all hear, you're having those collisions, or you're able to facilitate those collisions much easier than you would if you know, somebody's in Texas, and somebody's Missouri and all that. So, exactly right. So now, that's the exciting thing for us is beginning to build this larger ecosystem or cluster of companies that won are all going to be great employers. They can partner with us on workforce development activities, put people to work, but two- begin thinking about, okay, what are the next steps in terms of their product cycle? What are the next steps in terms of their manufacturing processes? How can they innovate? How can they continue to lead? So that it's something that in our community we, we haven't had much of in the past couple of years, or the past couple of decades, so it's really incumbent on us to figure out ways we can better unlock that growth, facilitate it, invest in it, help startups in that space, make sure that people that don't participate in those industries, you know, study based or MWBE based startups participate in that and generate wealth, so that's, that's the challenge. It's upon us right now.

Andrew Fish 12:35

It's great, great opportunity, and lots of challenges for sure.

Kate Hammer 12:38

Ben, growth is a lot of work. It's great, but it's a lot of work. Where do we need to focus?

Ben Sio 12:43

Growth is great. Growth is a lot of work. Growth is really difficult. But growth also brings with it a lot of negatives, right? The gold standard and economic development, the thing that everybody goes through, they don't often talk about it. But the thing that everybody goes for is population growth. Right that at the end of the day, if you are achieving population growth in a community,

that means you're doing something right. You have all of the inputs for why somebody would want to move there and stay there and all that, right. You have opportunity. You have good places to live, you have affordable housing, you have good schools go down the list of superlatives. You have population growth, you are doing something, right. And in Upstate New York, we haven't had population growth in the past 70 years. Right. But why is growth important? How do we capture that growth? And what are the negative impacts of the growth? Let's start with the negatives first, right. And this is something we're thinking about a lot right now, this is the one of the biggest challenges that if you look at across the country, the places that have grown in the past 30 years, most of those places are sprawled, right, they haven't really necessarily grown up or become more dense, they've grown out. And in doing so they've taken up a lot of free space, a lot of land, they use a lot of resources to do that. Right. So there's water issues in the Southwest. There's affordability issues, in almost all of these communities, right? You see a lot of displacement when growth happens. So there was a great article during the pandemic, where nurses in San Francisco couldn't afford to live in San Francisco anymore, which is not, nursing is a great paying position, and they just couldn't afford it. People get priced out of the market right? There. So and you were talking about commutes, right? You grow and you sprawl and your commute times increase, that means you have to spend more on roads and bridges. Sometimes people don't invest in public transit the way they should be doing. So growth definitely has its negatives, and we are laser focused on that. Because a lot of times when growth happens, it's not. It's not necessarily by design, it is not necessarily predictable. Right? So you could talk to somebody in Phoenix 40 years ago, and say, "Yeah, Phoenix is a great place to live. Everyone wants to move here and we're gonna see huge growth in next couple years." And they did see that but I don't think Phoenix necessarily intended that to happen or instituted some sort of strategy where people started to move to feedings, migration patterns happen. And a lot of things happen that people started to move there, or people move to Florida during, and after the pandemic. So but that's different here. We know, with Micron, that we're going to have 10s of 1000s of new people moving to the community, whether we like it or not. And we know that's going to happen over the next 10 years. Now, it's incumbent on us to figure out how to capture the positives of that growth, the population growth, and also think about how we can alleviate some of the negatives of that population growth, those negative we just talked about. And that's a really tall order. It's really difficult to think through, you know, how can we keep neighborhoods affordable? How can we not have homes just built in, you know, farmland? How do we make sure that we are redensifying, the city and redensifying some of our inner ring suburbs that haven't had the kind of investment that we've seen, or that we want to see. All those things are really, really difficult conversations. But what we have that those other places don't have, is a little bit of time, a little bit of ability to take a step back and say, "Okay, we know this is coming, now we need to plan for it. Now we need to figure out how to do it equitably, sustainably. And in a way that makes sense for us as an upstate community". The cool thing about that also is we have commitment from your state from Micron to help invest in those strategies to help invest in however, we ultimately put forward in terms of strategies to deal with those opportunities and challenges. So that investments coming through what we call this Community Investment Framework, I think it's really important to highlight. And I know you've talked a lot about the Community Investment Framework on this podcast already. But that hasn't been done in other communities. It's kind ever first of its kind. We have Community

Benefit Agreements in a lot of places, but a comprehensive documented set of commitments from the funder from the company, from local partners, that includes labor, that includes the community, that kind of things is not that we want to see it'd be the norm, and it should be the norm elsewhere. And I think a lot of companies are beginning to think about how they can replicate that kind of thing. But we have now this set of commitments, set of shared values among the company, among us, among our partners in the community. So we're beginning to kind of put those pieces together so that we can have this this cohesive strategy for how to deal with the growth in both positive or negative ways, right, because we've talked a lot about the negatives of growth. The positives of growth are what every community wants to see: more jobs, more companies coming, a diverse set of people coming, not just individuals that look like the three of us, right, more skilled labor, staying in the market and moving to the market. All of the people that graduate from our colleges and universities staying here in the community, people coming off the sidelines that haven't had meaningful employment, or are, are in an underemployed situation, all of those positive things can come with it. If we do it right. If we we can capture then make sure that wealth stays in the community. And that when we bring new people in the new wealth generated stays in the community as well.

Kate Hammer 18:12

Yeah staying, coming back. I mean, one term that we touched on in our last episode with Tim Kennedy from Advance Media NY, is this idea of the boomerang, right? Someone who leaves, they're gone for a few years, and then they return back to their hometown, back to Central New York, to work, to live. So you have quite a lot to do with The Good Life CNY, as I understand, right? Can you tell us a little bit about the significance of it for you? Why is it so important that we're telling the story?

Ben Sio 18:43

So I'm not a boomeranger, like, actually a lot of people. A lot of people that work with us, our boomerangers, or new to the community, right? Very few of us is good or bad, or this is a indictment on my personality. But very few grew up here, stayed here never left. I grew up here. I went to college in Geneva. So 40 minutes away, that's kind of here.

Kate Hammer 19:04

You left-ish.

Ben Sio 19:05

I kind of left. I had a job out of college, I went to undergrad at a place called Hobart William Smith. I had a job out of college in this field of economic development, urban revitalization in Washington, DC. A job offer at a nonprofit that was kind of examining this across the country. And before I was on the table, I was thinking about it. I like DC, DC is a cool city. I spent a little time there while I was in college. But while I was thinking about whether to take that job, my dad, at the time worked in National Grid said hey, there's a woman here that's doing a lot of really cool economic development stuff here in central New York. Why don't you go talk to her about what's happening in Syracuse, so I sat down with her name was Marilyn Higgins and she basically said, "Whatever you do, don't take the job in DC and stay here and grow your career in

the thing you're passionate about, which is economic development in a place that needs it." And so I did. I took a leap of faith and I jumped in and got a job at the Greater Syracuse Chamber of Commerce, which is a precursor to CenterState, right? And that was 17 years ago. I mean, I never left never boomeranged. But answering your question, we about seven years ago, we began to feel from a lot of our members, a talent pinch. A lot of people were saying to us, "Hey, we got jobs that are staying open for longer than they should. We are creating new jobs. We haven't been able to figure out how to land new people in our community. We're constantly pushing this boulder up the hill of Syracuse is a bad place to move to Syracuse having this negative perception nationally. What do we do about it?" So in true CenterState fashion, instead of coming up with a strategy immediately we studied it, we created a task force of folks chaired by Chedy Hampson, at the time who was growing TCG Player. And that task force had a series of recommendations, one of which was we need to get better at attracting people from outside the area to come back into the area. And that idea that strategy ultimately grew into what has become Good Life CNY. And what is evolving is our talent, attraction strategy. The biggest thing that we needed to communicate, two things we need to communicate. One, there's economic opportunity here in Central New York, this is seven years ago, remember? And two, that people here love it here. And it's, you know, the the narrative of Central New York as economically depressed, or really snowy, or the high tax environment, and you can't afford to get anything done. One of those is true. Right? And it is snow, it's snowing. Yeah, there's a narrative of, "Hey, we can only attract people to your community, if you're a sunny place where it's 90 degrees all the time, and you can get to the beach in 20 minutes." It's not true. It's not true. And the fact that companies, all companies in the US are not in those places, also is a testament to the fact that there is a relationship between a location, a company and talent. And that relationship is not as cut and dry as "Hey, everybody wants to move to Florida. So I'm going to move my company to Florida, because that makes sense." So we've done a lot of work and trying to flip that narrative, all of those things, we amplify through this process to show to the outside world, not just one company doing well, because that's important. But what's more important is showing to the outside world that there are many companies doing well. So, "Hey, you move here, because you got a job at JMA Wireless. And you're here for six years, and you want to try something new. What people want to know is the opportunity in other companies for them, not just at the company that they moved here for. And if you're able to show, "Hey, if you worked here, there's six other companies that pay very well and are great places to work that you can move to if for whatever reason you're not satisfied at the company, you just moved here for that kind of communication," that kind of message has been really helpful to us. Yes, it's still snowing. And it's always going to be snowy. Maybe for the next I mean, decades for a little while. That's not this podcast, right?

Andrew Fish 22:59

We can do another another climate podcast.

Ben Sio 23:01

But the narrative of a high tax environment. When people when people actually look at what they get for that investment, the school system, the infrastructure, the fact that if it snows, your

roads going to be plowed that morning. You go to other communities, you know, I spend time in Washington, DC, snows one inch there, the city shuts down.

Kate Hammer 23:21

Panic.

Ben Sio 23:21

And doesn't happen here, right? So you get you get investment, or in public services for what you're spending. So people have to understand that piece. It's a little bit of a different narrative for some folks. But I can tell you, almost 100% the people that move here that stay here for any meaningful time, don't want to move. If they get transferred by the company most of the time they're leaving the company and getting a job at somebody else somewhere else here. They're not transferring out because the company asked them to and that's that's great. That's what we want to see. We're through good life through this this talent attraction effort. We're trying to tell more of those stories to show to people that hey, there are fantastic opportunities here the community and once you hear people stay, people love it, and I think has been successful so far. It's our, it's incumbent on us now to figure out how we can broaden that message, how we can attract more diverse talent here. How can we can attract international talent here? How can we make it easier for individuals of all backgrounds to land here and stay here and feel included in the community? That's where we're going?

Andrew Fish 24:17

Well, we need to take a quick break and we'll be back to continue our conversation with Ben Sio after this word from our presenting sponsor of Talk CNY, NBT Bank.

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Andrew Fish 24:57

So Ben, you and I have had the opportunity to work together for over a decade. I've been at CenterState for seven and a half years. And prior to that we did a lot of work together on the Regional Council when I was was over in Cayuga County. I mean, one thing that I know for sure is that no matter how many wins, we're stacking, we're always looking for that next thing. We're always striving for what else are we going to be working on what's next. So as we wrap here, what's next?

Ben Sio 25:17

So we have this this big project that you may have heard of called Tech Hubs. We just were a month ago, we were notified that we were a winner in the designation. The great part about that

is that just means we have to apply now for more money for \$75 million. Just fantastic, right. But that over the next couple of months is what we're going to be really focused on putting the projects together, ultimately to go into the Economic Development Administration for that. It'll be things like workforce development, funding, more funding for innovation, more funding to support the supply chain of companies feeding Micron but also feeding this smart systems industry that we haven't talked about, right? Because a lot of ways those companies and we found new companies, the cool thing about this, we found companies here in central New York. So there's a company in Jordan. We've discovered them for this process. Great little company. And they will be supplying to Micron, a little component, a fiber optic and on it goes into Micron's, manufacturing of chips. So the only company in the US that makes this little component. And without these processes without us getting into the community figuring out who's out there, what are they doing, how can we connect them to these opportunities, we want to find this company. Now this company is on our radar, we're gonna support them. They're part of our Tech Hubs work. And it's a great little story. There's 1000s of other companies in there. Because you think about semiconductors, you think about any sort of high tech manufacturing, or advanced manufacturing, the inputs to those processes are equally as valuable to us as economic developers because of the jobs they create as the actual jobs created in the plant, right? Because a lot of those are events manufacturers themselves, they are creating something they're adding value to a product. And that means they're paying their employees higher than average wages higher than what you would normally see in just a regular job here in New York. So super exciting. That's what we're that's what we're excited about that we're working on. There's there's hundreds of other companies we're talking to and supply chain from Micron that we want to help land here and that'll be happening over the next couple of months. We're finishing up the Community Priorities Document that Micron and Empire State Development are investing in and we're off to the races.

Andrew Fish 27:16

A lot of implementation, a lot of making sure that things go in the direction that we would like to see them go for that plan sustainable, smart, equitable growth.

Kate Hammer 27:24

Ben, it has been such a delight having you on the podcast today. Thank you so much for joining us.

Ben Sio 27:28

Thanks for having me. It's been great.

Andrew Fish 27:29

Absolutely.

Kate Hammer 27:30

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Andrew Fish 27:39

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Kate Hammer 27:45

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Andrew Fish 27:50

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Kate Hammer 27:57

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