



Urban Evolution Podcast – Erin Sexton and Joe Ward

Bill Von Bank:

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Erin Sexton:

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Joe Ward:

I can't imagine that there's a convention held ever again that doesn't have at least some people being remote. The hybrid model is here to stay.

Bill Von Bank:

Welcome to Urban Evolution, a podcast about harnessing creativity and innovation to transform communities. I'm your host Bill Von Bank. A unique partnership of civic and community organizations in Rochester, Minnesota joined forces in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic to help ensure a safe and resilient recovery for the community. The partnership is called Rochester Ready. My guests today are founding partners of this initiative. Joining me are Erin Sexton, director of community engagement for Mayo Clinic, and Joe Ward, president of Experience Rochester, the city's destination marketing organization. Erin Sexton, Joe Ward, welcome to the Urban Evolution podcast.

Erin Sexton:

Thank you, Bill. Appreciate being here today.

Joe Ward:

Thank you, Bill, really excited to be here.

Bill Von Bank:

Erin, what was your career path to Mayo Clinic?

Erin Sexton:

I actually came to Mayo Clinic in 2011 as our director of state government affairs. So I had the pleasure of being able to work on the DMC legislation when it first came to fruition. But when I first really came to want to come to Mayo Clinic, when I was about 25 in one of my first roles at the Minnesota Medical Association, I had met my predecessor. And I told him, I said, "Wow, I mean, you have one of the



greatest jobs. When you retire, I want your job." And about 10 years later, he retired, and I was lucky enough to replace him.

Bill Von Bank:
And you got it.

Erin Sexton:
And got the job at Mayo Clinic, so I've been here almost 10 years now.

Bill Von Bank:
And your title is Director of Community Engagement?

Erin Sexton:
Yes.

Bill Von Bank:
Joe, you are relatively new to Rochester, Minnesota. What brought you to the city?

Joe Ward:
What brought me to Rochester first and foremost, obviously, the job that I have, being able to oversee the Mayo Civic Center and Experience Rochester Convention and Visitors Bureau operations as we combine them. But really the thing that sold me on that job was Rochester, was the presence of the Mayo Clinic and such a nationally and internationally renowned organization, as well as the DMC efforts, the growth here in Rochester, just a place that I really like to be, and I like my family to be. It's a wonderfully safe community, and we're excited to be here. And so, I was hoping that maybe I could play a little part in helping Rochester grow and improve a little bit.

Bill Von Bank:
Well, welcome to Rochester.

Joe Ward:
Thank you.

Bill Von Bank:
Erin, both Mayo Clinic and Experience Rochester are founding partners of a community collaboration called Rochester Ready. Explain this unique partnership.

Erin Sexton:



I mean, the idea was to really come together with a focus on a safe and resilient Rochester. And the idea formed right as our economy was beginning to reopen. Mayo Clinic had been essentially ground to a halt for six weeks, and we were just beginning to open our practice and bringing patients back to the community. And it was really what can we do to showcase, one, that Rochester is taking the appropriate safety measures? But two, to give people confidence in that and really, I think, showing that collaborative approach to safety and the types of measures that needed to be put in place in the face of COVID-19 to give people that confidence in our community.

Bill Von Bank:

Joe, were there other cities or states that served as good examples for the Rochester Ready model?

Joe Ward:

Yeah, definitely. I mean, Asheville, North Carolina was one that really jumps to mind. That was the first that we saw. We were actually pretty early on this curve of doing this, so there weren't a lot out there. There were some chat groups that showed up really quickly on Facebook and such about basically our industry saying how can we help our communities?

And we're in a fortunate situation where we directly oversee the operations of the Mayo Civic Center, so there was a role that we could play more directly. But also, this very unique here that one of the organizations on the cutting edge of trying to get us out of this pandemic, in the Mayo Clinic, happens to be here and one of the partners, and that's something that's unlike any of these other organizations around the country. And we're really fortunate to have that because the messaging comes from a place of credibility, a place where people trust.

And so, a big focus of our Convention and Visitors Bureau as well is on how many people come to the city for Mayo Clinic. And so, we have to take a little tone there too, that these people are here primarily for probably a pretty serious reason. And we need to really reflect that with a sense of empathy, a sense of safety, and confidence in what we're doing here and becoming one of the safest cities, if we weren't already, certainly growing to be one of the safest cities in the country.

Bill Von Bank:

And I guess the advantage of this partnership is the collaboration, that it was multiple organizations coming together at a time when so many businesses were closed, and their reopening opportunity was starting, and they just needed that lift and that help by some organization. And so, multiple organizations creating Rochester Ready, that had to have been an advantage for the community.

Joe Ward:

Absolutely. I mean, some of these cities, they're in a situation where it's primarily convention visitors bureau driven effort to market. This is really in the fabric of the community. There's so many leaders that are involved in it, the integration, just the perspectives. From my perspective, to hear more about public health, to hear how the operations are changing at Mayo Clinic to adjust to this.



And so, from my perspective as a leader in the community to really be armed with more information with this kind of a group coming together, and then also recognizing new things we need to add. We ended up welcoming the Diversity Council to that partnership later on and realizing that that's an element that we need to be able to communicate to all audiences.

Bill Von Bank:

Erin, why was the formation of Rochester Ready of particular importance to Mayo Clinic?

Erin Sexton:

Bill, as we were really reopening our practice after we had been really ground to a halt for almost six weeks and in March and April, it was important that Mayo Clinic give our patients confidence that it was safe to come back to us for care. But our community is a huge partner for us, and many people travel for care, they need to stay in hotels, dine in restaurants. And so, it was equally important that our patients have confidence that Rochester is a safe place for them to visit too.

And so, Rochester Ready and the Safety Pledge that was put in place was a really great way for us as a community and Mayo Clinic to showcase, one, it's safe to come to Mayo for care. But two, it's safe to come to Rochester, and that the safety measures being put in place are the right ones, and that businesses and restaurants and hotels are taking this incredibly seriously and the safety incredibly seriously.

So we were able to showcase to our patients, the businesses who had signed on to the Rochester Ready Pledge, and then convey to them the safety measures that were being put in place by those businesses to really help instill that confidence in our patients who are coming to us for care that they would be safe inside of our walls, but that the community was taking the appropriate steps too.

Bill Von Bank:

And Erin, I know you were intimately involved in the development of that Safety Pledge, along with public health officials, Olmsted County, as well as the state and the CDC. And Joe, then you and your team mobilized to really bring this out in the public, to the hospitality businesses, to the retailers, to the restaurateurs, to the hotels, to showcase the Safety Pledge, and then get them to sign up for the pledge. Easy task, not so easy task, how did that work out?

Joe Ward:

We're a convention and visitors bureau, and we're also in the hospitality industry with the concerts and things that we have in our building. So we're not afraid to go out and talk to people. We're excited about that. And obviously, our jobs had kind of come to a screeching halt. And so, that was a way that we could use the skills we provide. And I think that's the big part of this partnership is our skills... I'm not a medical doctor. I'm not a health official. But we have certain skills, whether it's marketing and sales.

And so, we turned and pivoted a little bit to bring those relationships and develop them and carry out them in the community. So our sales team aggressively went out really fast to primarily hotels first because that's where we're getting a lot of feedback that people were coming in from out of town



to go to Mayo Clinic and just weren't sure where they could go, where they could eat, what was open, what wasn't. There's a lot of construction going on in the city at the same time. And so that's, I like to say, pardon our progress, but at the same time, it can be challenging for visitors. And so, it's great to use our skills.

We had a little more time to have a marketing person who was available at the time to develop a messaging that really worked well. So we're just going to bring the resources where we are. I think, for me, to see that and go, "Okay, sort of everybody knows who they are and what they bring." And that's really cool because there's so many different viewpoints that are coming to the table and different skill sets.

Bill Von Bank:

You signed on nearly 100 businesses to this pledge?

Joe Ward:

Yeah. And I think the thing that... I'll give our team credit here because they, at that time, there was no mask mandate in the community yet. But the Safety Pledge called for a mandate to accept your guests wearing masks. And so, that was a bit of a challenge because people were like, "Well, wait a minute, the city's not telling me that I have to have a mask yet, but your safety program is." And that's where, honestly, the credibility of an organization like Mayo Clinic comes involved. It's like, well, they're recommending that along with these other health partners and these other people in the community. This is the standard we'd like to set. And then I think it just proves the cutting edge that was there because shortly thereafter, there did become a city-wide mask mandate.

Bill Von Bank:

That's a great point, Erin, because when you were working on the Safety Pledge document, the state mandate hadn't been in place yet for masking. And then, it just became an evolution over what the community needed to do next. So what's cool about Rochester Ready is you evolved as state executive orders evolved and the pandemic just kept lingering.

Erin Sexton:

Well, and I think, Bill, that's a really important point. I mean, we have learned so much. I mean, we think about this, COVID-19's been with us now nine months. And what we know now versus what we knew in March and April and even May as we were starting to put this together is so evolved. And I think it's been one of the challenges with COVID-19, and really, I think getting people to adapt some of the measures that are recommended is because things have sort of evolved and changed over time. And that's to be expected as we're learning, and this was a new novel virus. I think that's been a challenge for us.

But thankfully we have such an amazing and strong public health department here too, in addition to the expertise that Mayo Clinic can bring, or even our colleagues at Olmsted Medical Center. Our Olmsted County Public Health Department is really top notch, and I think has helped to guide us



through in terms of what we're telling the public and how we're getting people to adopt some of these important measures. So I think that's sort of one of the benefits we've had here locally. But again, I think like most places, one of the challenges, this is a virus that we've learned more and more about as we've gone.

Bill Von Bank:

Erin, in your role, you have a pulse on the community as it relates to the pandemic. What's working and what are some of the challenges that exist?

Erin Sexton:

That's a great question, Bill, because I think it goes a little to the fact that we have learned so much. And what I would say is we have done a pretty exceptional job here in Rochester and Olmsted County. I mean, we ask people to mask up, stay six feet apart, and wash their hands, and people have done it. And I think that's reflected really strongly in the fact that our numbers have even been better here, and better in a good way, than even our larger state average in Minnesota and far better than some of our surrounding states too. And I think that's largely we are a healthcare-driven community. And so, people take this guidance very seriously.

Joe Ward:s

They expect it.

Erin Sexton:

They expect it. Right. That's exactly right. And they've largely adopted it. So I think we've done a really good job, and the fact that we've had sort of opportunities for really unified messaging and direction to our community through efforts, collaborative efforts, like Rochester Ready through the work of our Olmsted County Public Health Department, through the information that Mayo Clinic and Olmsted Medical Center are putting out. Frankly, a lot of our organizations here stepped up and worked... You said the Rochester Chamber of Commerce and their webinar series, the DMC webinar series, so the education and content available to this community has been really phenomenal.

And then, the other thing I'd add is I think we've really learned as we've gone too, to figure out how do we reach sort of all parts of our community? And I think this is a challenge anywhere. We have, I think, racial and ethnic minorities that maybe weren't getting the kind of information they needed translated and in terms that really, I think, helped make sense. We have different socioeconomic groups that maybe we weren't reaching right away. And so, we've had to really look differently.

And to Joe's point, the Diversity Council joined Rochester Ready. Rochester Ready teamed up with Rochester Healthy Community Partnership. As we're looking at how do we really, I think, reach populations in a much different way? And have now deployed more of a geo-targeted marketing campaign around the safety measures that we need to continue to take and target that really very specific populations. Part of what the benefit's going to be is it's helping us build muscle that's going to serve us, I think, much better long-term too, in this community.



Bill Von Bank:

Joe, part of your role is management of the Mayo Civic Center, which is the city's convention center. Once COVID hit, you had to shut down. That's a big hit. How impactful has that been?

Joe Ward:

You're right. It's a big hit. It's a significant hit for the community, and for us as professionals that like to plan group gatherings. We were the first effected, and we'll probably be the last to recover along with our hospitality partners in the community. It's been devastating for our industry. It really has.

That being said, our organizations across the country, our partner organizations with other convention and visitors bureaus and destination marketing organizations have always tried to strive to find other ways to communicate and become, let's say, a better partner in the community. And because the nature of our business is typically to advertise to people outside the community, it can be challenging sometimes to have a real maybe integral role where people don't prioritize it as much as they should.

So for us, really the first lesson for me was we have to take this innate sense that we have inside our building to make things busier and kind of more fun and more dynamic and manic on some level and be like, "Okay, we got to slow this down. The community needs us to help it stop for a while. Stop to restart." And so, from an economic standpoint, obviously, enormously impactful. We've lost hundreds of events, and that's really sad to see. But at the same time, we know our role right now is to be a different thing and to be a different partner.

And I personally am really excited because in very few cities do you get the opportunity to work with the largest employer, which also happens to be one of the most significant healthcare organizations? Typically that's not a real area that CVB gets involved in. With the economic development portion with DMC, the city, the county, Olmsted County Public Health, all these different partners, and I can't imagine how that would not lead to some tremendous partnership opportunity down the road for all of us.

I think we've all seen what we can bring to the table and that we're all willing partners and we care. And that's an overwhelming sense in this community that I would encourage people, if they ever get a chance when all this is over, to come see in Rochester. It's an overwhelming sense of care, an overwhelming sense of empathy, and looking out for people. It's really great to be part of. And so, as a newcomer, as you said, it's sort of like I'll have a hard time leaving Rochester one day because when you go through a pandemic with people, I think you've pretty much gone through just about anything.

Bill Von Bank:

Good point. Joe, tell us how your organization has jumped in to help during this challenging time.

Joe Ward:

With our pivoting and having to change and screech things to a halt, I'll just kind of give you a little bit of the transition we had. So I think it was on March 10th that we hosted a nice tasting of our new food options for our partners at Mayo Clinic in their meeting planning division. We were really excited about



some new things we were doing, new chef. And then, three days later, we were closed, and everybody was working from their home or their basement.

Bill Von Bank:

Just that fast.

Joe Ward:

Yeah. And then within 48 hours of that, we had been reached out to by the city and the county to step up in this time of need and help them create a shelter for homeless individuals in our community for a day shelter as well as a warming shelter. It was still March at the time, so obviously Minnesota, it can be a little cold that time of year still. So we partnered with them, and in 48 hours, our team, again, used their skills they had to help and work with Catholic Charities was involved in that as well, I think the Salvation Army, and just to get this up and running for people. And that was in our building until July of this year, then they kind of took a break and found some other solutions temporarily. And then, we were able and fortunate enough to be able to partner with the Boys and Girls club in our community once distance learning became such a necessity. And so, they operate five days a week inside the Mayo Civic Center.

Bill Von Bank:

With some of my other podcasts interviews, I'm learning that out of necessity, people and businesses are having to pivot. And from that pivot, it's a change in business operation. Do you see some of that happening with your organization?

Joe Ward:

Oh, completely. First, just at the very basis of what we do, we have meetings, conventions. I can't imagine that there's a convention held ever again that doesn't have at least some people being remote. The hybrid model is here to stay. I mean, a lot of people are worried about the in-person model. And I'm not going to lie, we are a little bit too, see what's going to happen, are people going to still meet in person? I do believe people will meet in person, but I do believe there's an opportunity for groups and associations as well to expand their reach because they can also offer online elements. And so that's an area that we're investing in to make sure that we're on the forefront of that, so we can have hybrid meetings in our building.

And so, just on that very basis alone, we've done the safety measures that we're putting in place. We just went through our heating and air conditioning units. There's some new units out there that kill thousands of viruses, including COVID-19. And so, those have been installed in any large meeting space in our building. And those are things that, okay, hopefully COVID-19's in the rear view mirror one day, but there's still viruses out there. And so, it's every step of the way we're getting safer, we're getting smarter, and really learning, like you said, how to pivot and how to try to be a better partner.

Bill Von Bank:



Erin, now that vaccines are coming online, what do you view are the next priorities for the Rochester Ready partnership?

Erin Sexton:

It's nice to finally feel like there is a little bit of a light at the end of a very, very dark tunnel.

Bill Von Bank:

A little bit of hope.

Erin Sexton:

A little bit of hope, exactly, Bill. I think for us as Rochester Ready, part of what we have in place is that infrastructure to really look at how do we pivot from, I think, education around COVID-19 and making sure people are masking up and social distancing and washing their hands and putting all of these important pieces in place to, okay, how do we make sure people are getting the vaccine so we can move past COVID-19 at some point here in the hopefully relatively near future? So I think collectively-

Bill Von Bank:

That's a big task.

Erin Sexton:

It's a big task. It absolutely is. And I think like anything that's new, people are going to be hesitant and have questions, and that's okay. But I think Rochester Ready and the partnership that's evolved there is going to be really well-positioned to, I think, help go out into our community and educate and help build confidence and understanding in the timing and processes for the vaccine and the safety and efficacy to address some of those myths that are already emerging and out there to effectively reach minority and underserved populations, just like we were talking about in COVID-19.

And I think most importantly, Bill, is to build that hope. It's all of us want to get back to things that we've lost. I think of our restaurants that are closed and not being able to serve customers. I think of our people in our hospital who aren't able to have visitors with them at times of great need. I think of Joe and the amazing job they've done to pivot and make use of that convention space. But we as people want to get together. We want our kids to play sports. We want our kids back in school.

Bill Von Bank:

We need that social activity back.

Erin Sexton:

We need that hope. We need that hope. And so, I think that's a role that Rochester Ready is really well-positioned to play.

Bill Von Bank:



Erin, Joe, as you think about this past year, what inspires you? Erin, I'll start with you.

Erin Sexton:

It's sort of a tough question because I think this has been such a challenging nine months on so many fronts. But I think it is important for all of us to think about, okay, we've learned a lot, and there's so many, I think, inspiring stories that have come out of 2020. But really, I think what's inspired me the most is watching our staff on the front lines, our researchers, our lab that are working to battle COVID-19 every day. I mean, to see that amazing work that they've done so fast is truly inspiring.

I've been inspired by businesses here that even when they're devastated and doors are closed and they're fighting to figure out how they're going to continue to stay open, they're donating meals to our frontline staff. They're asking, "How can we help?"

Bill Von Bank:

That's awesome.

Erin Sexton:

It's phenomenal. I mean, it truly is inspiring. And honestly, I'm just inspired by the support for one another. I mean, you look at this community, and Joe said it well, we do collaboration well. We get together. We pull together. We try to figure out how we're going to support one another, how we're going to get through this, and how we're going to get our community through this, and I think it's one of the things that positions us maybe differently than other cities, and I think being resilient as we come out of this and really successful in defining our future and making sure that we are well-positioned to be a strong Rochester again.

Bill Von Bank:

Joe, as you think about this past year, what inspires you?

Joe Ward:

I sort of feel like I've been falling off curve balls since March and just hoping that one doesn't get past me. And eventually, there's going to be a fastball. I know it. And we're going to crush it over the fence. But so that is how do you adjust and how do you live and work in this?

But I'll tell you kind of two areas. One is just as a resident of Rochester, as a newcomer to Rochester, and as a parent. Late summer, early fall, my one son, eight years old, broke his thumb on like a Tuesday. So of course, we went to the Mayo Clinic to be treated, which was our first sort of taste of not the average appointment, even though a broken thumb is not some of the stuff that they deal with. And then, two days later, my 11 year old had an appendectomy. He all of a sudden he had appendicitis, and we're in for an appendectomy.

Bill Von Bank:

Oh my gosh.



Joe Ward:

And so, I feel like I need frequent flyer mileage now from Mayo Clinic and maybe a free coffee or something. But the truth is to see that care on the front line and in the, well, in the protocols, walking in was like, "Holy cow, they have it together." Then this caring of I got it. It was sort of like, "Oh, I get it. I get why people are coming here." Even for what I would call relatively routine things, there was nothing routine about the way we were treated. There's that part for me that's inspiring.

And then I really have to hand it to our team for being open. I mean, to go from, like I said, we're doing a tasting one day to meeting planners, then we're hosting a homeless shelter two days later, and then a Boys and Girls Club. And when I certainly came to town, I wasn't planning on this. But then again, I mean, think of all those people, those closed down restaurants that we're talking about that they didn't plan on any of this. Nobody did. Anyone listening to this didn't plan on this year. And so, let's just put that aside and figure out a way to help.

And so, our folks with Spectra that do our food, 8,000 meals they've served two homeless as well as Boys and Girls Club since March. Our team, again, who's used to planning meetings, they're now signing up people for a pledge for Rochester Ready. I hear stories of other communities pulling together, I feel like we've done it, maybe not necessarily better, but in our own way. And so I would just, I think this is a good model that I would encourage other communities because there really is value in involving many different partners. In some cities, your largest employer is not going to be a healthcare organization, but what can they do? What part can they play? What expertise can they bring to help you, not just in a pandemic, but in bigger challenges down the road?

Erin Sexton:

One of the most, I think, fun things is as we've gone into the holidays, and we've had to think about our staff, who are used to getting together for holiday gatherings or sharing some celebration and recognition of each other during this time, and we really haven't been able to do that. And we thought long and hard. We know we have businesses struggling over here. We have our staff who aren't going to be able to gather over here. How do we sort of bridge that gap?

And this holiday season, we were thankfully able to find a partner in Gift Rochester and look a little differently in how we recognize our staff. And we were able to allow our managers and supervisors to shop local this year, which we haven't done in the past. And it resulted in \$257,000 being spent at our local downtown businesses.

Bill Von Bank:

A quarter-of-a-million dollars?

Erin Sexton:

Yeah, quarter-of-a-million dollars-

Bill Von Bank:

Wow.



Erin Sexton:

... just in our downtown businesses that are struggling right now, and what a great benefit. And we've heard from our staff, they love it. They love the gifts they're getting, the opportunity to support local, and what a time to be able to invest and spend those dollars at our local businesses. So that's been, I think, another bright spot in looking at how we do things different.

Bill Von Bank:

Well, hats off to both of you. I really appreciate your time. Erin Sexton, Joe Ward, thank you for being guests on Urban Evolution.

Erin Sexton:

Thank you, Bill.

Joe Ward:

Thank you, Bill. Glad to be here.

Bill Von Bank:

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