**Public Sector Future podcast – Future of Infrastructure**

**Episode 1 – Relinking a community**

**Jeremy Goldberg [host]**

**Mayor Quinton Lucas [guest]**

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Welcome to the *Future of Infrastructure*, a series of public sector future episodes featuring the people and projects driving the next generation of infrastructure around the globe. We are pulling back the curtain to show you not just what the most important infrastructure projects are, but more importantly, how public sector leaders are getting them done.

I’m Jeremy Goldberg, Worldwide Director of Critical Infrastructure at Microsoft, and I’m your host for the *Future of Infrastructure*. I’m really excited today to bring you this series of important conversations that puts people at the center of the discussion during this important moment for global infrastructure.

Today, and I couldn’t be happier, my guest is Kansas City Mayor Quinton Lucas, who is here with us to talk about a current project that’s underway, U.S. Highway 71. Mayor Lucas, welcome to the *Future of Infrastructure*.

**QUINTON LUCAS:** It is great to see the future today and happy to be with you all.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Wonderful.

So for those that haven’t met you, aren’t familiar with your work just yet, you know, briefly introduce yourself. Tell us a little bit about Kansas City.

**QUINTON LUCAS:** Well, Kansas City is more than you may know. A lot of people talk about Chiefs football and great barbecue here, among other things. But it is a growing Midwestern city. We’re known in some ways for one of our older companies, Hallmark Greeting Cards, often left from people, although I know a lot of people know Hallmark now for Christmas movies and that sort of thing.

But we have a growing design, professional, engineering, other building services, array of people that are a part of Kansas City’s business ecosystem, and certainly tech and innovation are a big part of all of that with us.

So I’ve been mayor since 2019. I got elected mayor. My team went to the Super Bowl. We won. We had a big parade. I sat back for a minute and said, “Oh, my God, this is like the best job ever. It seems so easy.” And then, you know, then it was March 2020. It has been an interesting several years in the gig, but I think it’s also liberated us to take a few more risks than we ever did before.

So real briefly, accomplishments that I might be known for, we have citywide zero fare public transit, both on our bus system and on our streetcar system, which is awesome for us. We have also worked, I think, mightily in addressing long-term housing issues, including having something called a Tenants Bill of Rights, where we’ve given tenants so many more rights, including a right to counsel, among other things, to address housing issues. So those are a few of the areas where we’ve worked, but we have, I know, a lot more work to ahead.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** So we’ve already talked a little bit about politics, a little bit about sports, talked a little bit about housing and transit. I do have to catch, though, my favorite barbecue spot because you did mention barbecue. What’s your – what’s your go-to?

**QUINTON LUCAS:** I love them all the same. It’s like loving your children. So some of you may watch the show, *Ted Lasso*. He has T-shirts –

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Of course.

**QUINTON LUCAS:** – and it’s like Joe’s Casey, Gates Barbecue, Arthur Bryant’s, Jack Stack. There are so many good ones. And he manages to like mention all of them. So I can try to be as cool as Jason Sudeikis, but I say, come to Kansas City, we’ll show you a good weekend, good barbecue for every part of the weekend experience

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** I’ve enjoyed Jack Stack. So that’s great.

So I’m really interested to know, first of all, why you got into public service, beyond maybe a general desire to improve things because you’re clearly like very mission and impact focused? You know, what event or what moment really stands out to you in terms of this motivating choice to take this path, to go this path and this career?

**QUINTON LUCAS:** I remember when I was a kid, I had this amazing mayor, our first black mayor of Kansas City was a man by the name of Emanuel Cleaver. He is actually now a senior statesman of the United States Congress. And I remember seeing his impact actually around the time of the Los Angeles riots. So we saw what was happening in LA. I saw lots of people were upset. There were a lot of issues in my community that I knew and concerns.

And he was somebody, an African-American gentleman, as I am, who could bridge communities, who knew how to quell dissent without telling people that you’re wrong or that your voice isn’t important.

And I thought ever since then, first of all, my God, mayors are so important, because fundamentally at the time it was a story of looking at what was happening in LA, where Mayor Tom Bradley was dealing with Police Chief Daryl Gates. You saw the local nature of issues that become so big. And I think from the Kansas City perspective, we saw where the local side can really make sure people feel heard and ultimately make a difference in the world of the future. So that’s where it all started.

I then remained a political nerd for some time, watching primarily African-American mayors around the country, who dealt with any number of issues, David Dinkins in New York, going on from there, more recent folks who have been good mentors to me. So I finally, you know, decided to jump in and see if I could be somebody that some kid talks about in a few years, good or bad.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** I love it. One of the topics I know we want to discuss today is U.S. Highway 71 and something that you’re really – you know, I’ve watched a little bit of it, I’ve seen some of the reporting on the topic and the work you’re up to.

And so it seems like, you know, in terms of openness or reluctance, both historic and kind of going forward, this feels like an area where you’re really putting in work. And so, I’d love to just understand a bit more about what this project is and what it means for the city and what the desired impact is.

**QUINTON LUCAS:** To know more about this project is to – to go back in time and oddly enough, not that far back in time when much of what we were doing in cities and states around the country were building these roads that just bulldozed through communities.

I was actually reading a book recently about Kansas City and they talked about how there was this part of the city that used to be an area of tenement housing and so many things, but they needed to build a highway and they put it right through. Right? That was like in the 1940s.

Fast forward to the 1970s and ‘80s when they are clearing out neighborhoods where a lot of black Kansas Citians lived, including a number of people in my family, and the compromise was that, well, we’re still going to take your houses, we’re still going to move thousands of people out of the community, but what we will do as part of the compromise is we’re going to build stoplights so that people don’t go too fast through your community. Instead, perhaps they’ll stop and interact with the neighborhoods and all of that.

What it has ended up meaning, unfortunately, is that we have the highest car crash accident intersections in Kansas City, running straight through the core of the black community. We’ve seen pedestrian fatalities. We’ve seen bicyclists killed on this road. And we have not seen the community bridge-building that folks expected and what was sold to us 40 years ago or so.

So I think my goal right now is, while I can’t get now deceased people in my family back in the houses they had to give up, maybe we can reclaim that community. Maybe there’s a way we can relink a community, and maybe there’s a way that we can show that infrastructure, while important and efficiency key, doesn’t have to mean that you are casting one part of our community that’s disproportionately minority in a box on an island that’s disconnected from other parts of the city.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** That’s great. I mean, I particularly like your reference again, thinking about history, not so, you know, it’s not so far gone, right? It’s we talk about the 1940s and you’re thinking about issues around safety and like decisions that were made to protect lives, to keep people safe, while at the same time having the opposite like impact and effect, and really in some ways negatively impacting people lives and separating communities.

So when you look at this situation and you look at sort of what a lot of mayors and others are focusing on with the –with the infrastructure bill, you know, advancing vision zero, right, a lot of these topics around pedestrian safety, road safety, talk a little bit about, you know, the role here in terms of the federal infrastructure bill and how that – how this plays into this particular challenge around U.S. Highway 71.

**QUINTON LUCAS:** So there is right and wrong in terms of what mayors and city council members and local leadership are doing right now. The wrong approach to federal infrastructure dollars is saying, “Oh, thank God, I can finally pay off all these things I’ve already encumbered” or, “Oh, thank goodness I can do the most basic bare minimum stuff that’s in my city,” of which all of us have billions of dollars in deferred maintenance. So you could probably spend the whole bill and just fill potholes.

But fortunately, I think there are some of us who are trying to be a lot more forward looking and saying, this money gives us a unique opportunity to say, all right, if I’m looking at the next 50 years, 100 years at my community and where I want it to go, then what would I invest in and how would I do it? And understanding that the infrastructure conversation isn’t divorced from technology. It isn’t divorced from urban planning and from equity and from climate change.

And so, it is us saying, like on Project 71, well, there’s a problem right now with having thousands of cars, tens of thousands of cars idling every day. What type of pollution impact does that have on a community? How can I make it better? Our tree canopy is insufficient in the area. What can I do there to make sure that we have a lesser carbon imprint impact on our community? I mean, it’s those sorts of things that we’re trying to integrate.

So for me, infrastructure bill gives me a flexibility that I did not have. It’s hard to believe, but two years ago, when the pandemic hit, a lot of us were saying, “Oh my God, my city budget is shot.” Local income taxes down, sales taxes down, convention and tourism down, like everything down. And so, what a lot of us did was triaged and tried to handle all that we could.

This gives us a chance not just to be in the midst of a recovery in some way, but to get back to saying, okay, 10 year, 20 year, 30 year, long-term planning, that’s something that we’ll also do with our infrastructure chat.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Some of the things that kind of comes up when I’m hearing you talk about the impacts, as you mentioned, like the carbon accounting side of this, right, in terms of reducing the carbon footprint. So that sounds like one area where there’s a desire to impact and improve.

And so how will you know in terms of moving forward, evaluating the success that you’re making, you know, both in the case of like the sustainability efforts, but how will we know, how will folks know that we’re making progress?

**QUINTON LUCAS:** A few things, I think. One is, if we ever move beyond just saying, shovel ready, and we actually didn’t objectify every project as, “Well, you know, it’s good to go, I don’t know if it’s useful or not, but, you know, we got the bulldozer ready. We got some construction guys. Let’s do this.”

So I think for me, it actually is the sort of thing, and I know people don’t always trust this, but it will be the sort of projects that are being discussed. It will be us being able to share as local government leaders, well, this isn’t just one bit of pork barrel spending in a part of a city. This is instead something that really changes your community. And so, I think a part of that will be sharing that stuff and sharing how you got to it and why.

I think another sign for the public of the differences these projects can make is when we actually quantify the – the changes and then, how do you do that? You quantify the saving in time for somebody who’s walking some distance to catch a bus and not crossing a state highway anymore at a bunch of dangerous traffic lights. I think you look at the economic development that is built up, even announced sometimes. When we first announce a project, you see that in infrastructure all the time.

We have fixed rail now in Kansas City. We actually didn’t for about 80 years. In our backwards thing, we had streetcars in the olden days. We covered – we paved them all over. We’re just now getting them back. And the economic development benefit in our downtown corridor has been exceptional as a result of that.

And then I think the final area you look at is when we look at our broader goals that are being discussed in society. You know, mayors spend a lot of time talking public safety, a ton of time talking public safety, budgets, business development, jobs, schools. To what extent have you been able to build a community that, frankly, makes all of those things more accessible, builds a safer community, builds better walkability, builds more investment, particularly in historically underinvested communities? That’s where I think the measurement will be and I think us talking about those sorts of projects is great. And what it is not doing is us just saying, hey, we’re going to add one more lane on the interstate.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** What’s been your own experience with Highway 71? For those that have not traveled on it, that have not been on it, for those are listening, can you kind of describe it for them through maybe one of your own – your experience with it?

**QUINTON LUCAS:** I first experienced it when I was a little kid and I saw this giant dirt area and I asked an older man in my family, I’m like, “What’s that?” And he was like, “That’s a faster way downtown.” And I was like, that’s interesting. Because you saw this giant area that was like in the middle of my community, right, it was near my barbershop, it was near where we lived, it was all of this. And I thought, “Well, did anybody think about my community?”

And it turns out they did. To be fair, there were folks that did neighborhood meetings, there were lawsuits filed. But to me, it is more of a – a sort of thing where it’s always been the type of road which does get you through the community faster, but I’ll even sit at those lights sometimes and say, “But nobody is interacting with the community. We’re not getting some sort of engagement.” Instead, I think it actually met its central goal, which was to get people from the suburbs very quickly through the inner city. But in the meantime, I think it’s created and led to a lot of sustained harm for those who have lived in the inner city.

So my interaction is a road that I know probably too darn well, that I imagine I got my first speeding ticket in life on, but that also I know is a divider and I don’t want to see it divide anymore.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Thank you for the personal connection to it as well. You know, one of the things, Secretary Buttigieg, you know, has from the start, in his role at the U.S. DOT, has talked about as sort of righting the wrongs like of the past as it relates to our roads and bridges and infrastructure and the division that you’ve talked about in terms of how some of those infrastructure investments have divided communities.

I’m interested in terms of when you think of and what you share with your colleagues, your other mayors around best practices of implementing something similar that we know is an issue across the country and the world, but across the country here in the U.S., what are you suggesting? What are you advising to them as they think about their approach to righting some of these wrongs as we plan for the next 10, 20, you know, 30 years here?

**QUINTON LUCAS:** First step is know that it can be done. A lot of us in mayoral positions, first of all, face the challenges of each and every day coming at us. And the public is rarely saying, I want you to think ahead about what’s the impact of this road long into our future. They’re saying, plow my roads, right, do all of these very concrete things right now.

And so, I think the first bit of advice I have with mayors is trust your public a little more than you might think. Maybe yeah, they’re planning about a snowstorm and snowplows and all of that. But frankly, your network of roads is important with it. So you need to think about, right, where are people, how are they moving best, how can I be more efficient? And so, that is one thing I’ve looked to.

I think another thing is making sure you bring in the neighborhoods that are impacted very early in the discussion. And, you know, I don’t think it’s bad. A lot of us, look, we’re mayors, we’re from our communities. We really, really, really seem to care about our communities. For better or worse, right, we’re way to into cities. But I think in too many cases they’re saying, “Well, I know, dang it, what’s going to be good for everybody who’s in my neighborhood.”

And to me, the real way – I had somebody tell me this once, and I’ll try not to make the cliche last too long. You know, this guy was critiquing those leaders who see where the crowd is going and he runs in front of them and says, “Yes, I’m with you in this mission.” Real leadership is seeing where the crowd is going and turning them the other way and saying, “I got you. You want big box store development, suburban style, and that’s going to be the way that we make Kansas City better.”

But, the real story is not that. The real story is actually investing in the neighborhoods that you think are gone. It is investing in people who’ve been separated. It’s understanding why those development patterns won’t work. And as you’ve seen in a lot of cities, right, this is kind of the core of gentrification was the chat chip in a whole other way, but areas that were once un-investable are ones that have seen these tremendous booms.

And I think for me, the real goal is how do I make sure that I’m leveraging infrastructure investments, among others, to see that boom, but not in needing the people who live there to leave to make it happen? How can I say now, hey, I’m going to bridge your community, I want you all to be here, and we care about it, not because there’s a new project coming in or we’ve decided to build a new fancy Taj Mahal. It’s instead that we care about you and we know we can make a difference.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Final question. So for our audience, I mean, often lots of people are asking, you know, kind of what’s trending, what you’re reading, what’s happening out there. So what’s one thing you’ve read, watched or listened to lately that had an impact on the way that you’re thinking about technology or this moment in infrastructure and recovery?

**QUINTON LUCAS:** So I am nowhere near through with this book, nor do I just read books by police chiefs, but I have started the book written by former New York Police Commissioner Bill Bratton, the more recent one. And it’s got this interesting start because beyond kind of the core policing issues, he mentions what the 9-1-1 system meant to neighborhood policing.

Before 9-1-1, which has not been around that long, for all you kids listening. Like, you know, you may think it’s just always been a thing. But turns out, you know, more recent. Before 9-1-1, you had police officers who actually needed to walk a beat and would know everything that was happening in the neighborhood because they literally just walked around. He was a cop in Boston. I mean, you get 9-1-1, you start to get more specialty units. You have police officers driving bigger ranges.

Frankly, you get some of, I think, the negative interactions that we see now, because if an officer is driving from one terrible scene to the next terrible scene to the next terrible scene, and sometimes they may be in drastically different parts of the community, rather than him saying, “Oh, I know that Jeremy’s mom lives there, Quentin lives the next door,” all that sort of stuff and seeing the trouble.

And to me, what I think is important for us to note is what are the externalities, positive and negative, of our use of technology? 9-1-1 in many ways good. I can call you if I’m having a heart attack or something like that, or somebody hopefully could call on my behalf.

Maybe a negative is that we lost some of the observation that was done in policing and thus lost some of the connections that existed between police and communities, and we are feeling the pain of that a lot in every American city now.

So that’s something that made me think about it. I have no idea what to take from it. It’s not like I’m going to abolish 9-1-1 or something, but it at least has me knowing how we got here and maybe ways we can get to better solutions long term.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Great. You mentioned zero fare public transit –

**QUINTON LUCAS:** Yeah.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** – early on. Just maybe take a couple minutes and just talk about that program a little bit.

**QUINTON LUCAS:** Yeah, absolutely. You always have these consultants sometimes in these types of jobs. And so they told me, “Yeah, Lucas, you can’t call the busses free or else people will get mad because people hate free stuff.” Who knew?

So zero fare, zero emissions public transit is really Kansas City’s goal. We are procuring a fleet of electric vehicles, so that part is exciting for us. But on the zero fare transit side, it comes from this. We were running the numbers on our bus system one year and I realized that from fares, you’re actually not collecting as much as you think. Fares don’t support any system. And indeed, in some systems where they try to have fares collect and support most of the system, looking at you, MTA of New York City, right, you end up with all types of long-term funding challenges where the state or the city usually has to like hop in anyway.

And so I thought, all right, is there a way that through the grants we already receive, we have a public transportation sales tax in Kansas City, can we make the busses free, putting a few thousand bucks back into the pockets of so many people who rely on public transit each day and who could need it the most? And we were able to do that.

The pandemic hit pretty early, so all ridership was off. So it was a very affordable program at the beginning. But even as we see ridership coming back, I think you continue to see a lot of positives. More people were riding than we thought would have been during the times. We have not seen a dramatic increase in public safety concerns, which was one of the first things expressed.

And frankly, you can look at transit systems where fares are required and you still have issues with crime, unhoused populations, et cetera, in those areas. And so I think the real answer to crime and homelessness and all of that is actually addressing them at their root causes, it’s actually addressing those issues. But on this, we saw zero fare transit really just help people get around, help them get to appointments, help them get to where they needed to be, help them get jobs. And it’s something I’m immensely proud of. I know it’s something we’ll have to keep fighting for because every few years there is somebody new who says, “Eh, it can’t be done. We studied it. “And I think here in Kansas City, we’re showing the opposite.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** And that, I think, is a perfect point to end on. I know you’re very busy. You’re putting in a lot of work. I appreciate the time that you’re taking to talk with us today. Appreciate you being a guest on – on our podcast. I look forward to meeting up in Kansas City the next time and seeing Highway 71 for myself as well.

**QUINTON LUCAS:** I look forward to it. We will feed you some good barbecue and make sure you have a great time in Kansas City. I thank everybody for listening.

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