

MARTY ROSENBERG
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BRIAN PLATT INTERVIEW

Hi and welcome to Grid Talk. Today we're pleased to have with us, Brian Platt, the 37-year-old City Manager of Kansas City, Missouri.

Q: Hi, Brian. How are you?

A: I'm doing great. How are you?

Q: Good. We're very excited to talk to you about your plans to develop 500 megawatts of solar at the newly refurbished Kansas City International Airport. The airport itself is undergoing a \$1.5 billion dollar facelift that'll be completed in a few months. Tell us about this city initiative to try to have solar located at the airport.

A: Well, one of the things that we're thinking about as a city is how we can be better stewards of the environment and improve health and quality of life for our residents. And one of the things you think about of course with air quality and pollution and health outcomes is how do we reduce carbon emissions? How do we make sure that our air is clean and that we've got a comfortable environment for us to live. The other thing that

we've been thinking about also is grid resiliency and redundancy. About a year and a half ago, we had brownouts and blackouts in the Kansas City area and in the region because of the wet weather in Texas because of freezing temperatures in Texas, and we were thinking, how do we prevent things like this? Yes, of course, our energy utility partners are going to be doing things that will improve the stability of our grid but are there other things we can think about as well? So, we're thinking about two things here is grid resiliency/redundancy and also sustainability and air pollution and carbon emissions. And Kansas City's an interesting place. We've got a huge asset here which is our land. We've got 318 square miles of land we are nowhere near developing this city to the most dense place it could be. And the airport in particular, we realized had a few thousand acres of land and they are otherwise undevelopable. There's no one that would want to live in a house next to a runway. Office space obviously not going to be that enticing and attractive there, so we think, what else can we do with it? Well, in thinking of the challenges we've been working on, we were exploring wind and solar of course. Wind, of course, not optimal at an airport because of the height of the turbines but solar, very, very interesting in that site. We identified 3,100 acres of land that can be used for solar development that can produce up to 500 megawatts of solar panels

on that site. We could potentially power 70,000 homes from a solar array in this location which would be about a third of the city. And these are all hypothetical, theoretical numbers of course until we start building the thing and seeing and knowing exactly what's it's going to do and how it's going to look, we won't know for sure but these are some of the estimates that we've been given by an analysis we had done. So...

Q: So, Brian, if I could just interject a second the scope of your ambition, I want to make sure our audience understands that a project of 500 megawatts would be one of the largest solar installations in the country..

A: Yeah.

Q: The largest I could find right now is a 690-megawatt farm being developed 35 miles northeast of Las Vegas at a cost of \$1.3 billion dollars, again would have 690 megawatts, where you're pretty darn close with 500 megawatts..

A: Yeah.

Q: Kansas City's not a hotbed of this kind of effort. You would think this would emerge either in California or possibly in New England. Why do you think Kansas City is ready for this and what kind of reception is it getting?

A: Yeah well, I'll say one thing, if we ever want to make positive change and progress in these existential and

generational challenges that we're facing, we have to be big and bold. We have to think creatively. We have to think at the scale of this. It's not just one solution either. It's not just this one big solar rater either; other initiatives that we're going to have to think about as well, and are ready for it? We've been ready for it. Every city's ready for the sort of thing. We've just got to have the energy and the political will to take those forward steps and we've got that now which is a great place to be and it's a great time to be thinking about these things.

Q: So, Kansas City could very well be in a pioneering role that cities around the country and perhaps around the world will be looking at what you're doing. Just give us a timeline here. I understand your RFP (request for proposal) closes in a month...

A: Yeah. Our...

Q: And your plan really is to get the 500 megawatts in the decade so get into the weeds a little bit about how this might unfold.

A: Yep, we've got an RFP that's out; it closes in a month or so. We will probably hopefully make some forward steps in the 2023 calendar year and those forward steps are going to be two parallel tracks. One is, we want to build and bring online some amount of solar as quickly as we can. There are rules and regulations that I'm sure many of these listeners know about, if

the size of the solar production facility or any energy production facility goes above a certain threshold, it becomes a utility-scale operation and it requires and triggers so many more reviews and permits and cycles of the applications and federal involvement and all that stuff and so it's going to take a long time to do the full buildout of the 500 megawatts mostly because of those processes, but we do want to see solar production right away as quickly as we can. That might be five or 10 or 15 megawatts that powers the entire airport terminal to make us essentially a carbon-neutral airport as much as possible and there may be some additional energy fed off the grid there. We've got three substations that we can use as a starting point so maybe it's three smaller installations of community-level solar that we start to build maybe next year. I don't have specific numbers yet because we don't have responses in front of us or an RFP with an approved contract that shows, here's the vendor; here's what they can do and how quickly they can do it but the two parallel tracks are something that we're very much focused on.

Q: So, I know from chats you and I have had and articles I've written about this that the city is agnostic as to whether it winds up owning the asset and certainly a project of this sort you talk about is an essential threat we all face it with climate

change, it would be a challenge to the reigning utility Evergy. You're okay as I understand it whether it's city-operated and owned; whether Evergy owns it and operates it or possibly a third party. Talk to me about your talks with utility and whether you prefer having a third party or the utility owned and operated or how would this evolve?

A: Yeah, great question. You know, I'll reiterate; we are 100% agnostic as to the financing structure and ownership model of this project. Our vision and goals are purely for green zero emissions energy and energy resiliency/redundancy of our power supply, and that's it. We would also appreciate reductions in cost for energy ratepayers around Kansas City provided that we've got maybe a cheaper energy source that is a local energy source as well. It doesn't cost as much to get electrons from the production facility to the homes, so cost is the third factor as well. But we're not trying to make money off it necessarily. We want those other three things more so. We've had good conversations with a lot of different groups and entities that are involved and interested in this with federal representatives from the Department of Energy, with Evergy, and our local utility providers here and I think the challenge that we've all got is we don't have a specific proposal in front of us that we're evaluating to say that this is what the numbers look like; here's

what it means for everybody and so I don't think anyone's ready to commit to say, we absolutely agree with this model versus that model. I think we're all in that place of let's just see what the numbers say and what they look like before we're going to commit to saying, who's going to own it? Who's going to operate it?

Q: Could it be city owned? You know there are cities, there are municipal-owned utilities around the country?

A: Yeah, we have no problem with that. We are also on the other side of it, not in the solar energy production facility management business. We're not experts in it. We'd have to hire people to run it for us anyway so, but if ownership structure meant that there was some kind of tax break or other incentive that we would be able to provide to it because the city owned it, we are certainly up for that.

Q: So, you say that you're not looking to make money off of it but do you have a vision of stabilizing rates or possibly lowering rates for your economically disadvantaged residents?

A: Hope so, hope so; it's just some of the economics of how this works. Obviously, if you've got, if you have to push those electrons a farther distance to go from power to generation facility to the user, the end-user to someone's home, it's going to cost more. If we've got an electricity production facility in Kansas City arguably those electrons travel a shorter distance

and so it should be cheaper to get them from place to place and the rate should be cheaper. And also, there's a potential that this facility pays for itself. We've seen it in other solar arrays where the facility is built and a bond is issued or debt is issued to build it, but then the debt is paid by selling the energy back to the users or to somebody else. It, sometimes it could be a distribution company or Evergy or whoever it is and so, because hopefully and arguably there might be less layers of bureaucracy, layers of companies that are involved in it, maybe it's going to be cheaper. We don't know. We don't know what the numbers are going to show yet. We don't know what the costs of the solar panels are going to be by the time we get these responses. A lot of things can change but yeah, there's a chance that it could reduce the costs for our ratepayers but I think more so, we're looking at health outcomes and we're looking at grid stability and energy grid redundancy here as the biggest objectives and goals. The cost is going to be sort of a 'nice to have.'

Q: So, let me inject another bit of news which has recently been disclosed that the Carbon Disclosure Project, the CDP based or launched in London, recently elevated Kansas City's grade from a "B" to an "A-" moving you to a select group of 1,000 cities globally they evaluate. What...you're a young city manager, 37.

You're City Manager of a major city, Kansas City, Missouri. You formerly had that role in Jersey City where you were interestingly also Chief Innovation Officer. What does this tell you, this ambition and this kind of recognition that's coming to a, let's face it, a conservative Midwestern city. What does that tell you about where the cities of this nation are headed?

A: Yeah, it's a great signal for us as a city. It's recognition of our achievements. It is acknowledgement that we're doing the right thing and moving in the right direction and I think one of the thing that city leaders deal with everywhere is trying to prioritize the things that we want to do and the things that they want to do, city leaders, but also being able to...Mayor Lucas here said it once really well, like "walk and chew gum at the same time." That you don't just have to focus on one thing at a time. It's not just about, for example, street resurfacing and snow removal. It's not just about crime. It's all the things. We've got to solve all the problems. We've can't only focus on one or two, or a select few of them and I think we're doing a great job of being progressive and visionary and thinking about the future and with things like this, while also improving the basics: service delivery of the city, making sure that all of the things cities are supposed to do, making sure all of those things better.

Q: One note I want to ask you about is the Biden Administration has passed some infrastructure legislation. Do you think your timing might be perfect on this solar project given the incentives that will be out there for renewable energy?

A: I hope so. It's sort of inside baseball here but you think about a president or anyone who's running for office and having to run for re-election. They want to point to something that they've done and when the Biden Administration turns around and is starting to think more critically and specifically about the things that they can point to as achievements in this subset of government or any of them, they're going to want some wins, things to point to and we're going to be one of those shovel-ready projects that we hope is something that they will say, "Hey, this is ready to go; it's already been vetted; it's already moving. We can throw a little bit more money into it to just bring it across the finish line" or whatever the resources are. I don't know if it's expediting approvals; I don't know if it's financing. There are so many ways that they can help. We do have good relationships at the federal level with the people that matter so we're... I think that our timing is perfect right now coming into, not this year but very soon and that election cycle that will hopefully drive bringing some of those things across the finish line.

Q: There are several other innovations on the energy front I'd like to discuss with you. One is starting last May; you approved the program of changing out your streetlights of putting in the AV-4000 LEDs to achieve a 50% reduction in energy use and pretty much pay for the cost of the project by saving \$27 million dollars over a decade. Talk about how that is going and how innovative is it? Are all cities doing this or are you among a few?

A: Yeah, you know innovation...I talk a lot about innovation and what it means and to me it's all relative. Years ago, it was innovation to send a piece of paper electronically between fax machines and that was considered the most amazing thing ever and now, if I can't watch the Chiefs game live from my seat in an airplane 5½ miles above the surface of the earth, I'm mad and so, you think about like-perspective about those things. And so, innovation to one city might not be to another city and vice versa and cities all over the place are doing this and governments all over the place and it's not just in the United States. LED streetlight conversions have been happening everywhere for years and so we're not the first to do it but it is innovative to us because it solves problems in a unique way. We were thinking about this originally as a budget savings tool. We've got a \$13 million dollar annual spend on streetlights

between maintenance and energy costs, and the thought was, how do we bring that number down? And, is there a cheaper maintenance plan? Is there a lower cost or a lower energy usage bulb? The answer is LED streetlights do both of those things. Instead of four- or five-year life cycles for the high-pressure sodium bulbs, that the orange glow bulbs that you see everywhere, LED lights on the box say 10 years but we think we're going to get maybe 15 or 20 years out of some of these, so already right away, we're having more than 50% reduction in maintenance costs. Energy costs are also about that; 40% to 50% less energy usage for this same amount of light, maybe even a better more natural color of light, and so, there's a lot of benefits to this. We end up calculating out that this will reduce annual CO₂ emissions because of reduced energy usage by 29,000 tons a year of CO₂. That's an equivalent of taking 6,000 cars off the road every day in Kansas City. That is an amazing, amazing reduction of carbon emissions from something's that's so obvious and simple that many other cities have done but we're just not doing here yet.

Q: So, one of the rumors I'm picking up on the street is that the city is saving so much on this electric light conversion, it's getting more money out to fix potholes. Is there any truth to that?

A: Well, I, so, yes and no. We...when I got here, we were in the middle of COVID and budgets were being decimated by economic challenges not just in Kansas City but everywhere and so, it was an opportunity for us to pull a lot of savings levers and to rethink the way we were spending every penny to renegotiate leases; to just think critically about how we were funding things. This LED streetlight conversion was one of those things and it actually has other benefits we've been talking about with reducing carbon emissions but it was a budget savings tool as well. And so, I wouldn't say that the streetlights are directly funding more pothole filling but we've done probably 15 or 20 different things, large to small, that have helped us stabilize and shore up the budget and we are in one of the best financial positions that we've ever been in. We've got more cash savings that I think we've ever had and so, we're in a good spot. That being said, we've got a whole new approach to street resurfacing as well. We've done exponentially more street resurfacing this year than we've done in any of our records show; hundreds of miles of streets have been resurfaced and so, we're just having those potholes in general which has made it a lot easier to fill them all but we're filling three times as many potholes that get reported. I think we get about 8,000 or 9,000 of potholes reported this year and I think we've filled 30,000 potholes or

32,000 potholes this year so we're getting more efficient with filling them, we're using technology to help us move around our assets and our resources in a much more efficient way to make sure we're filling as many as we can as quickly as we can, and it's gone really well—all those things.

Q: So, I'm sure our listeners are not aware of this but you are. One of the most energy efficient apartment dwellings in the world sits on Second and Delaware right here in Kansas City, close to downtown. Talk about that and what you're doing with building codes to make sure that gospel gets spread.

A: What an amazing project. I think it's probably worth an entire show just to talk to the team down at Second and Delaware. I'm so excited about it and I think what's so great about it is that often times things like this remain in the theoretical. That their ideas, that they're on paper and that no one wants to take a risk and put it into practice and build the thing and see if it works or not. And here, it worked and I think it worked better than anyone imagined and the results, even though the building construction costs are higher for that building, the housing costs for people who live there end up being lower because energy costs are so much less, so much less; it's almost like 90% less. I don't have the exact numbers but such a huge reduction in energy usage and as a result, they've got...and because the

building is so unique and innovative and leading edge and energy efficient, people love that, so they've got a...

Q: So, if I could interject, one of the innovations is they built it to last several centuries didn't they; Jonathan Arnold...

A: Yeah.

Q: So, is there anything there that you can extract from this in terms of the city building codes initiatives?

A: Yeah, so we in Kansas City adopted a 2021 ICC Building Energy Efficiency Standards which raise the requirements for energy efficiency for buildings and for energy loss reductions and making sure that your housing, your dwelling units are all energy efficient. And we, of course like everybody had pushback from people who are arguing that it's going to drive up the costs of housing. And that's true; it does drive up the cost of housing if you're not building energy-efficient housing and if you're building cheaper housing that doesn't have all of those mechanisms in place. But also, you've got to think as you said, building quality improves and so the building will last longer. Your energy costs go down and so it costs less to live in that housing unit over time and so, there's an upfront cost that's higher but there's a down-the-road cost that end up listing, paying for themselves and it's a really important thing. The building energy codes don't go into effect until next year in

Kanas City just to make sure that we've got enough runway for people who have might have already trying to design project using the old code. We don't want to have to make them start over but...

Q: Next year is 2023 or 2024?

A: Next year, 2023.

Q: Okay.

A: I don't remember the date. Yes.

Q: So, let's talk about EVs a second.

A: Yeah.

Q: Evergy was one of the leading utilities in the country in terms of getting recharging/charging stations out there early. How's the city kind of jumping on this and looking for new opportunities to expand electrification?

A: Yeah we ah...last Spring; it was actually 2021; it was maybe May or June of '21, we adopted a policy requiring all new city vehicles to be 100% zero emissions, battery electric where feasible or available so that means, if there is not an electric firetruck on the market or if there's a dump truck that's electric but it's just four or five times the cost and it really doesn't make sense for us to buy, those can be exceptions but if you're looking at F150s or just regular passenger vehicles, if there's a suitable option, it's got to be electric. And the benefit there is that we're driving adoption and we're pushing

farther and faster than we would have otherwise. If we were leaving purchasing decisions to the way they were people would stick with what they know, they'd stay buying exactly, they'd just replace like-for-like, one-for-one. The other interesting component about this is that we're trying to reduce our fleet as well so it's one thing to buy a bunch of electric cars and replace the gas-powered ones. It's another to just have less of them in general and reduction of driving, maybe car sharing, carpooling, all of these things are important to reduce the number of vehicles on the road and reduce the need for energy usage in general.

Q: So, the last innovative area I want to take you to is your initiative to plant 10,000 new trees in the next three years. That's a lot of planting in a short time window. Talk about how that melds with the city's vision of addressing climate change and heat islands, and what will the impact of that be you think overall?

A: Yeah, obviously we all know there's tremendous benefits, it's air quality and heat reduction from trees. One of the great things about Kansas City is how we've got such great tree coverage and tree canopies city-wide; however, that doesn't mean that we're perfect and it doesn't mean that we don't have room

for improvements. We've got areas of the city where all you see are trees and we've got areas the city where all you see are houses and buildings and we've got to find that balance. We're also here just trying to take big, bold steps. We're backing into this number, 10,000 trees thinking how many can we reasonable plant in a year? How much money is a reasonable amount to start with? And let's try to get momentum going for just planting a bunch of trees. Other cities like Chicago and some others, they are within the same range. Cities that have been doing this for a longtime; 3-, 4-, 5,000 a year is an ambitious but reasonable and feasible goal and we think we're going to be able to meet that pretty easily.

Q: So, the last question I want to ask you, Brian; when you went to city manager school where ever that was, they didn't talk to you about megawatts. They didn't talk to you about solar generation. They didn't talk to you about tree coverage or EV conversion of fleets. What kind of skillset is needed in the city managers of the future and what does it tell you and I want you to tell all of our listeners that a city such as Kansas City, kind of right close to the geographical center of the United States, is taking all of these initiatives; it's getting international recognition, where we're headed and whether we should we be optimistic about what the future might bring?

A: Yeah, yeah, great question so, there isn't a city manager school. I wish there was. There isn't even a resource you can go to learn about all the things it takes to learn how to run a city. There's not one single book or class. I have a Master's in Public Administration from Columbia in New York but even that did not prepare me fully for something like this. And I think that the skills that are most important for a role like this or similar roles, leadership roles are a few. One is just curiosity. You've got to have that wonder and that desire and that interest in these things. I find myself so often just Googling things; making phone calls, asking questions; seeing something in the road and asking why? Why does it look like this? Why can't it look like this other thing? What do other cities do? And just having conversations, continuously. I read books about all these things. I have a book about trees right here on my desk next to me cause I was curious about a couple of different trees I saw and what they were. And, it's a very basic curiosity that's so important but you've also got to have that passion and it overlaps with that curiosity. You've got to want to make these changes. It's hard, I mean, it is hard. Status quo is easy to continue, just ride the waves. It's hard to go from one direction to another direction especially in a public sector in a government operation where there's so much resistance to that

change, but it's so rewarding. It feels good to be able to look forwards and backwards and see the things that we're doing and the changes that we're making and thinking, if it wasn't for us in this moment, would things have changed? I think we would argue that yes, things would...we are the reason why that things are changing and I think that we're...more varied to your second question; we're very bullish on Kansas City. It is an amazing place. It is an underrated place where not a lot of people know about yet, which is great. We've got this opportunity to showcase this city to the world. We've got so many national, international events and opportunities for people to come here. NFL Draft is here next year. We are one of 11 cities in the U.S. hosting the World Cup in 2026. We're on shortlists like that everywhere. We're becoming more and more a destination and everyone that comes here, is so amazed at this place. The people are amazing, the culture, the restaurants, the social opportunities, just the way the city feels, it's so great and I love it here. I've been here just about two years and hopefully for many, many more.

Q: So, that raises another question. Trusting climate change, do you think where the "rubber meets the road" if you will, is really at the city level as opposed to grand national policies?

A: It's everywhere but I think cities...a lot of other mayors will say this as well. Mike Bloomberg is one that I know better than others just because I was so close to New York City for a while but cities are already actioning. Cities are aware things get done and where things get implemented and a real connection and service delivery occurs. Federal policy is important, making funding available, setting priorities, creating that framework but no matter who the president is or who's in Congress, we still have to plow the roads. We still have to pick up the trash. We are planting the trees. We are making those local policy decisions and implementing new initiatives to support people who are homeless and building affordable housing and all the things that matter to people are at the city and the local level.

Q: Thank you, Brian.

A: Thanks a lot. Thanks for having me.

We've been talking to Brian Platt, the City Manager of Kansas City, Missouri.

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