**Future of Infrastructure podcast**

**Episode 3 --** Be Obsessed with Delivering the Basics

**Subtitle:** How infrastructure investments can help cities deliver for their residents and built trust

**Jeremy Goldberg [host]**

**Mayor Justin M. Bibb, Cleveland [guest]**

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Welcome to the *Future of Infrastructure*, a part of Microsoft’s Public Sector Future series. I’m Jeremy Goldberg, Worldwide Director of Critical Infrastructure at Microsoft. And I’m on a journey to learn more about how infrastructure is being built around the world by talking with public servants, philanthropists, artists and place-makers who have spent their lives working in the public interest. This is a series to help us build things and plan for the future while putting people first.

My guest today is Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb. And we’re going to talk about a long-time issue in Cleveland, the lakefront.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Well, first of all, great to join you here in Cleveland City Hall, Mayor Bibb.

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** Good to have you.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Absolutely thrilled to be here, see a bit more of the inside of this building that I haven’t visited, as I mentioned before our conversation, since I was in the seventh grade. So seeing you here at this desk is quite incredible.

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** It’s good to have you in Cleveland, Jeremy.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Absolutely. So, you know, I was reflecting as I was, you know, flying from New York this morning on the last time I heard you present in person and it was at the Meeting of the Minds conference –

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** Oh, that was a long –

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** – in 2017 age at all.

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** That was a long time ago.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** 2017. You haven’t aged at all. And so, you know, at that time, I think you’re with Gallup.

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** Yeah, yeah.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** And, you know, at that point, you were talking a bit about customer service transformation, the work in tech, right? And so, you have not only an understanding of what it takes to take technology and enable positive change, but what it takes to build an ecosystem, right?

And so, with that as sort of the opener, you know, for this discussion, you know, I would love to hear from you, you know, as you introduce yourself, a bit about what motivates you and drives you to think about what it takes to get change to occur in a place, in a city, and why, you know, this role and this moment, right, was right for you.

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** Well, I think my career arc really is an embodiment of my belief that it truly takes every sector to uplift an American city, particularly a city like Cleveland, given the structural challenges that we inherited on day one when taking office.

You know, before I took office, Cleveland was ranked the poorest big city in the nation. One out of two of our children are living in poverty. Several years ago, *CityLab* magazine ranked Cleveland the worst city in the country for black women. So these are some major structural headwinds.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Absolutely right.

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** And if we learn anything throughout this pandemic is that government alone can’t solve these problems and in isolation. And, you know, I’ve always set out throughout my career to get experiences in consulting and in banking and in government and the nonprofit world.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Really across sectors.

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** Yeah and as a – as a community activist and civic organizer, to really think about how do we bring new voices to the table to really solve some of these age-old problems? And, you know, looking back on that speech I gave in Cleveland at Meeting of the Minds –

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Yeah, right down the street, yeah.

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** – when I was at Gallup, was this idea of a resident voice and policymaking being rooted in the voices, in the will of the people. And that’s how I ran my campaign to become mayor and we did the same kind of listening throughout the transition. And we just finished our 100th day in office, and we’ve done a whole lot of listening.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Congratulations.

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** Thank you. We’ve done a whole lot of listening since we took office on January 3rd. And for me to listening never stop. So I think always listening to your customer, the residents that you serve, centering our work on equity, and I think those two things are important because if you listen and center the work around equity and justice, then I believe we are truly getting at the heart of making sure that what we do actually improves the lived conditions of the residents that we’re trying to serve.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** I love it. I want to come back to the listening and equity pieces of this conversation and, you know, for our listeners who may not be familiar with Cleveland, tell them about it. Talk to us about Cleveland. Tell us about the city. Tell us about some of your favorite things, places to go, things to do.

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** You know, I think this story of Cleveland, it’s not really told enough where really the arc of American society has always been really rooted in Cleveland in many ways. You know, the world’s first true industrialist, Rockefeller, born and raised in Cleveland, the world’s first billionaire.

And so when you think about the heart of the Industrial Revolution, it centered in a legacy American city like Cleveland. You think about the fact that we were, you know, the first city to elect a black mayor, a major American city to elect a black mayor in Carl Stokes, that’s rooted in Dr. King’s struggle for civil rights and political advancement in American society and in the civil rights movement. Cleveland is a part of that story.

And then you think about the arc of our nation’s fight for climate and environmental justice, you know, we were challenged with our river burning on fire and that work led to the Clean Water Act, which led to the creation of the EPA.

And now as we start to write the next chapter of not just Americans, America’s story, but Cleveland’s story, I think this will be the era of the mid-sized city. And I think Cleveland, we’re big enough where what we do matters –

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** It does.

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** – but, you know, small enough where we can innovate and test out new ideas to really change how we think about managing cities for a post-pandemic future.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** That’s great and I think you’re right. I mean, sometimes in those mid-sized cities, right, it’s easier even to drive some of that and take some risk, right, which is not something that government typically is willing to do, right?

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** No. Yeah.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** And so, is there a moment in your, you know, your – in your youth or in your trajectory here professionally, where you’re like, you know what, service, like this is where I want to be? I know running for mayor, being mayor of Cleveland is like, this is what it means, this is where I want to be.

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** I had some really early examples in my childhood. You know, my father, who passed away over six years ago, was a fireman and a police officer. He did both jobs for nearly 30-plus years. I have his firefighter helmet in my office –

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** I see it there, yeah.

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** – here, and I’m always reminded about that spirit of public service when I come in to City Hall every single day through his example. My mother, who’s a social worker right now, she’s fought for HIV/AIDS victims across this community, and she continues to serve senior citizens all across the community as well. And this pandemic was really hard on her and – and the folks that she was trying to serve.

And then my grandmother, who was a ripe young 92, was the first example that I remember of a true political activist. You know, Jeremy, I grew up in one of the toughest blocks in the city on 121st Street and Dove in the early 1990s. 60% of our folks on my block lived in poverty. We had some of the highest rates of high school dropout, and we were really at the epicenter of the crack epidemic.

And my grandmother refused to let dope boy sell dope in front of her house. And, you know, she mobilized and organized the first Street Club on my block to keep our streets safe. And so I had some very early examples of public service and organizing and giving back. But my first real love was basketball.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** We share that love.

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** Obviously, I didn’t turn out to – yeah, right. Obviously, my jump shot wasn’t good enough.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** You played in the celebrity game, though. I saw that.

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** Yeah, no, I did okay. I did okay.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** (I saw LeBron on, too?), I think.

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** Yeah, exactly. Exactly. Got to support LBJ, the GOAT, by the way.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** That’s right. That’s right, he is the GOAT.

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** But, you know, seeing what I saw in the city and in this nation during 2020, during the pandemic and after the tragic murder of George Floyd, I just realized that this was the time for me to step up and serve my city. And I’m happy we were able to be victorious in that effort.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Talk a bit about, as you formed your team, right, so you’ve hit the 120-day mark.

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** Something like that.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** (There must be?) something in there. So the team and the people that you’ve recruited, I mean, I’m looking at like, you know, not only have you proactively and smartly, like recruited women and you brought them into high-ranking leadership roles.

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** Absolutely.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Bringing in young people, those voices, those new voices, right? What are you seeing now in terms of like your – as you’re listening to the community, as you’re hearing what they’re sharing in terms of reflections? Like what are some of the key things that you’re hearing, you and your staff are hearing about what’s going on?

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** Well, number one, we have to be obsessed about always improving basic city services. We can talk all day about criminal justice reform and inclusive economic development and smart and connected cities. Those things sound great, but if the potholes don’t get filled –

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** That’s right.

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** – if the snow is not removed, if leaves aren’t picked up, if we can’t, you know, have curbside recycling, then residents don’t have faith that government works for them. And so, you must always be obsessed with investing and delivering on the basics.

I would also say, I think Cleveland in particular is anxiously awaiting our coming out party, I believe. I said this in my 100-day speech several weeks ago, that Cleveland is a land on the rise and I truly believe that we are. We have all the ingredients of a major, world-class city, whether it be our arts and culture institutions, to our talented workforce, to this amazing asset that I get to look at every single day, Lake Erie, that really rivals, to me, any city in the world. So it’s time for us to really take our mantle and place in the world and show people that Cleveland can compete with the best.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Right. That’s a perfect segue into some of what we see now here in the U.S. with the bipartisan infrastructure law –

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** Absolutely.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** – and ARPA. I know, you know, city of Cleveland, what, 551 million?

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** 512.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** 512 million. Thank you for correcting me.

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** I wish it was 551. (Laughter.)

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Got to push a little more. You know, so I think, you know, you touch on the lake and the lakefront. Talk a bit about some of the priorities, you know, around the infrastructure work, how the teams are organizing here in the city around it, and maybe a little bit about the lakefront itself and that, you know, that’s clearly a very important part of Cleveland and a project there that I think, you know, you wanted to kind of dive in a little deeper on, too.

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** Yeah. Well, we have not just Lake Erie in Cleveland, but we have the Cuyahoga River, which I talked about before, which is now seen as a model of a waterfront revitalization in terms of what we’ve done to clean up our river over the last several decades.

And Lake Erie is one of the world’s largest sources of fresh water that we have right here in the Great Lakes. I believe as the economy moves forward, that water will be the new oil when you think about climate resiliency and climate migration patterns that we’re going to see across the world and across the country.

And finally making sure that we have access to the lakefront for all our residents is a major priority for me. This is about equity. Everyone deserves to access our lakefront and take advantage of all the world-class amenities that we can create on our lakefront.

So we’re doing a couple of things right now. Number one, we are trying to better connect our core of downtown to the lakefront, so it’s walkable and pedestrian friendly. And number two are working with the Metroparks, a local park management organization in Cleveland, to better connect the east sides of Cleveland and the west side of Cleveland to our lakefront as well.

And then we want to make sure that we’re leveraging the technology and innovation that can be leveraged as we think about Lake Erie in terms of the water innovation economy. And so these are some, I believe, really strong foundations we could build upon as we think about Cleveland’s future.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Let’s – you touched on something around accessibility and access to the waterfront, right?

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** Yeah.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Let’s talk a little more about that. You know, there is historically I mean, is it that, you know, folks on the east side did not have access to the waterfront?

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** We have a highway that was intentionally put there during the era of redlining that has essentially walled off the lakefront from black and brown communities in Cleveland. And this is where, you know, we have to kind of do the hard work of – of deconstructing –

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Yeah, how does that happen?

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** – some of these racist policies.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Yeah, how does this work? I mean –

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** One step at a time, you know, and I think it starts with thoughtful planning, doing the work I talked about in terms of listening again to residents and making sure they’re a part of the process and, you know, calling it out that the way that we’ve developed the lakefront has historically been racist and it’s time that we right that wrong.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** From an environmental perspective, you also brought up environmental justice. You know, it relates to this topic.

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** Absolutely.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Let’s talk a bit more, because it is a topic I’m hearing from a lot of other mayors, a lot of other city leaders globally as well. And it’s not rhetoric, right? I mean, so for those that aren’t maybe as familiar with what we mean by environmental justice, what does that mean in the context here for your administration, for – and for the city?

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** Let me describe this in very concrete, simple terms. You can walk four or five blocks between the east side of Cleveland and the west side of Cleveland and see vast disparities in terms of air quality. We have more trees planted in many parts of the west side than we have on the east side. And you see higher rates of asthma, higher rates of cancer where there’s not a robust tree canopy.

You think about the importance of health and the built environment, and we learned this in crystal clear terms during the pandemic, that the amenities of our neighborhood matter. You know, communities that had really well-lit parks or access to good, affordable, high-quality public transit probably fared better in the pandemic than other communities. So this is we’re having a very clear set of policies focused on environmental justice are so important.

One thing we’re trying to do in Cleveland to address this is, be one of the first cities in North America to adopt a 15-minute city planning framework where regardless of where you live, whether it be in a black neighborhood in the east side in Cleveland or a predominantly white neighborhood in the west side, that you have high-quality parks, high-quality grocery stores that sell fresh fruits and vegetables, and good quality transit, and a job you can walk to within 15 minutes. That should be the north star of every investment decision we make in our cities across the country.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Who do you think is doing a good job right now?

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** Man, there are a lot of good mayors that I have gotten to know well, that I talk to a lot, the Mayor of Birmingham, Alabama, Randall Woodfin. I’m talking a lot to the current mayor of Pittsburgh, Ed Gainey. We have a lot of things in common between Pittsburgh and Cleveland. I think Detroit is making some very great strides and the work that Mayor Mike Duggan is doing there has been fantastic to see. And, you know, everyone is looking at what Miami is doing right now in terms of attracting new investment in the technology and crypto space.

And so, there are a lot of good mayors across the country leading this fight, and I think it’s important to note that the climate justice battle won’t be won in Washington, DC. I’m gonna say that again: the climate justice battle won’t be won Washington, D.C. It’s going to be won in cities like Cleveland and like Detroit.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** That’s right.

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** And it’s important that we elevate the importance of this conversation nationally.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** So, you know, over the years, right, so the lakefront, the project that, you know, we’re talking about, has been a priority, has – this kind of I don’t know how many or how many years now –

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** A long time.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Decades, right? What are some of the operational challenges that will need to be overcome in order to accomplish this vision? And this is one of your priorities, right? So what do we think some of these things look like to achieve these desired impacts that you have?

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** There needs to be some stickiness to the vision. I think one of the things we had a problem with in the past is, you know, I joked around a lot when I said this during the campaign, that Cleveland has been a place where lakefront plans have gone to die. And, you know, we roll out a plan every year, but we don’t stick to it. And, you know, we really want to be an administration that lays the foundation for the next 10, 15, 20 years to make our vision for the lakefront a true reality.

I would also say an honest conversation about the future of Burke Front Airport. You know, Burke has been off the table for many other mayors. It’s not off the table for me. And it’s important that we interrogate whether or not Burke should be there, because it has huge implications for what we can deliver on to really make our lakefront world class and the future.

Then I think third, you know, I think our administration has more openness to true public-private partnerships in a way that maybe prior administrations didn’t have. And so we’re – for me, no options off the table. I just want to get it done and get it done right.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** So related to public-private partnerships, you’ve been a part of them, right, for over your career, and city hall and you have such an incredible convening authority, like ability. And when you look at successes and failures, maybe a couple examples of things, what does it take to pull off a successful public partnership?

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** I’d say, number one, you have to have a coalition of the willing. And number two. I’d say strategic alignment. And then thirdly, persistence.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** How do you get that coalition of the – of willing with a competing agenda sometimes, right?

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** Values. Values.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Okay.

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** Values (that are aligned?).

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Now we’re talking, yeah.

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** Right.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** So we think of, you know, let’s use the environmental justice, you know, example. So let’s think through a bit of what that looks like. Who are some of the partners in that process with you? Who are some of the people that –

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** The Greater Cleveland partnership.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Okay.

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** You know, many environmental justice organizations in the city. Metroparks I mentioned before. Obviously, you need buy-in from city council. That’s the legislative arm of government. That’s critical. But the residents. And the residents want this. They really do.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** They do. And you know, the hard part that you’ve mentioned several times, which I completely agree with you, is on the – the active listening, right, and doing the outreach and listening and then taking that information, taking those insights and then doing something with it, not on your own, but with the community. Rules of thumb, best practices on how to kind of gather that information and apply –

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** Yeah, that’s a tough one.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** –and work with the community and residents.

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** I don’t think there’s –

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Not everyone wants to do it, right?

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** Yeah, I don’t think there’s a one size fits all approach to this. I think every community has to find what works for them. I think the biggest thing that is needed is a commitment to doing the active listening and being consistent about it.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** One final question.

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** Yeah.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** What is one thing that you’ve read, watched, or listened to lately that had an impact on how you think about this moment in tech and infrastructure and kind of the COVID recovery phases?

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** I don’t think there’s been anything I’ve read or watched recently. I would say as a new mayor, there’s so much information coming across my desk every single day. I think the biggest thing that’s helped me in terms of how to think about infrastructure planning and investments and, you know, all the opportunity that we have as mayors with the American Rescue Plan Investments is just the – the growing support from the Biden administration and other mayors about what’s working in their communities. And that’s really informed how I’ve been able to get my cabinet bought into kind of our planning processes.

And so, I’d say this new fraternity of mayors that I’ve gotten to know over the last several months and the good work of organizations like U.S. Conference of Mayors has just been the, I guess, the best source of information for me as I get my – my sea legs here as a new mayor.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** But you got ‘em. And certainly I thank you so much for your time. Cleveland is a land on the rise.

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** It is. Spread the word for us, Jeremy, okay?

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** You know, we are, we will. We appreciate your time. I know that our audience will get so much out of this conversation with you. And I’m looking forward to continuing to track and follow all your leadership and progress here in the great city of Cleveland.

**MAYOR JUSTIN M. BIBB:** Thanks for having me.

[Music]

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Thanks for listening to this episode and being a part of the Future of Infrastructure, and for joining me on this journey to meet and learn from the people improving life in their communities. If you liked today’s episode and want to help other people find it, please take a moment to share, rate and review the show. To learn more, visit us at **wwps.microsoft.com**, or find me on LinkedIn and Twitter at **JeremyMGoldberg**.

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