

University of California's Director of Sustainability: Matt St. Clair

Introduction ([00:02](#)):

Welcome to Green Building Matters. The podcast that matters for green building professionals learn insight in green buildings as we interview today's experts in LEED and WELL. We'll learn from their career paths, war stories and all things green because green building matters. Now our host and yes, he has every LEED and WELL credential. Here's Charlie Cichetti.

Charlie ([00:33](#)):

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Charlie ([01:01](#)):

Hi everybody. Welcome to the next episode of the Green Building Matters Podcast. I really appreciate you listing every week where we interview green building professionals somewhere around the world. Today coming to us from the Bay area in California. We've got Matt St. Clair . He's the director of sustainability at University of California, Office of the President, Matt, how are you doing today? Good, thanks. Thanks for having me. I can't wait to learn more about you, your background. What got you to where you are today and also kind of what's keeping you busy today. Take us back, Matt, where'd you grow up and where'd you go to school?

Matt ([01:34](#)):

I grew up in Southern California, San Bernardino County, or the greater inland empire down in Southern California.

Charlie ([01:48](#)):

Did you have any influences about where to maybe go to school or what to pursue? What kind of trades? What was the next step after growing up in Southern California? It's like, what do I want to do as a career?

Matt ([01:57](#)):

Yeah, well, I grew up with childhood asthma in a basin that had pretty horrible air pollution. We were at the base of the San Gabriel Mountains and we couldn't see the mountains most of the year. I was fortunate to get a transfer based on my asthma to a public school in Mount Baldy Village. Every day I'd take the bus up the mountain and look down at the air that I was breathing in every day. So that certainly had an early influence on my environmental awareness. My parents had an organic vegetable garden in our backyard, and I watched lots of PBS nature shows growing up. I had an environmental ethic that I wasn't really aware of.

Matt ([02:40](#)):

It was just a part of my surroundings. At the time I was choosing where to go to college. I realized that I had what I could describe it as a calling to work on environmental issues and ended up going to the East coast for college, majoring in economics with a specialty or concentration in environmental studies and planning to go to law school, to have both economics and the law as tools to work on the environment. I took a little detour after college that led me to my career path that I've taken since then.

Charlie ([03:18](#)):

What a visual there, thanks for showing us that going up the mountain, looking back down on that air quality that is really cycled over the last probably 40, 50 years and now with the health and going movement. Finally getting more attention. Tell us about that early part of the career. Did you have any other kind of mentors or anyone you looked up to? Anyone else that maybe had some influence or opened the door for you?

Matt ([03:42](#)):

I decided to instead of go straight to graduate school or law school to join a volunteer service program. One that was run by a small pacifist church and they connected me with an environmental activist group in the Czech Republic. I spent two years after college working in environmental movement in Eastern Europe, in the late nineties, less than 10 years after the fall of communism. It was pretty amazing experience. I traveled to 16 countries in those two years. In each country hosted by the leading environmental activists in that country. It really sort of radicalized me or

opened my eyes to the fact that my heroes like Gandhi and MLK were considered radical in their time and over time became mainstreamed. It really empowered me to pursue a career in activism. Although I've pursued a career, that's ended up as an activist on the inside a changemaker within a large public bureaucracies is how it's worked out for me.

Charlie ([04:44](#)):

One of a kind experience you had there. An amazing story. I guess it has led you to choose this career path where it's kept you very excited about that change, that change that you've been a part of. Can you connect the dots? Tell us about a couple of places you've worked to get you to where you are now. Connect the dots there.

Matt ([05:06](#)):

Sure. In undergrad and grad school I had a number of internships in Washington, DC, just trying to get a sense of different ways to work on environmental issues and where I might fit in. I went door to door for public interest research group one summer. I interned natural resources defense council with one of their senior attorneys with a Worldwatch Institute, working for a research, environmental think tank. Also with the US Environmental Protection Agency and their office of international activities. After I came back from the two years in Eastern Europe and in grad school, interned for the California Public Utilities Commission and energy efficiency team. Also in the US Congress, the committee on science and the house of representatives worked on energy bill there. I experienced all those and didn't find one that was the right fit for me and ended up getting this job that I've had for the last 17 years now as the first sustainability officer for the University of California, System Office of the President headquarters. Based on my student activism as a grad student, where I got involved in a UC go solar student campaign and because of my activism experience and my energy expertise, I ended up being the spokesperson for the student activist coalition from across the UC system. When we succeeded in getting the UC board of Regents to adopt a green building, clean energy policy, the office of the president then hired me to help implement the policy and that's what I've been doing ever since.

Charlie ([06:43](#)):

17 plus years. Tell us what that encompasses. It's over 10 campuses, the medical centers, but can you show us the magnitude there?

Matt ([06:54](#)):

Yeah, it's like turning the Titanic. Sometimes it's a big large organization, but we can have a big impact when we can make changes. We have 10 campuses, the five medical centers where the land grant institutions, we have a agricultural natural resource network with a presence in every County in the state and 39 natural reserves throughout the state as well. We have over 200,000 employees and nearly 300,000 students and our annual operating budget is over 30 billion US dollars annually. Our previous president system-wide president Janet Napalitano, who came from president Obama's cabinet before that was Governor of Arizona, like to say that she had a bigger operating budget at UC than she did as governor of Arizona. It's a very large institution,

Charlie ([07:47](#)):

Thanks for showing us the magnitude there. Tell us a little bit about some of those early sustainability initiatives and how they have evolve. Was it about our buildings that we renovate our buildings that we build and maybe they need to be LEED or they need to be this to where has it maybe evolve. What are some of the main dates you have for your buildings? This is about green buildings so where has that kind of evolve? Where are you taking some of your in-house policy there in the system?

Matt ([08:16](#)):

We started with the green building, clean energy policy that encouraged, but did not initially require LEED certification. We quickly determined that LEED equivalency was not real so we were able to require a LEED certification and we've always added energy efficiency requirements above and beyond. Over time, some water efficiency requirements on top of the LEED requirement, which applies not just to new buildings, it's all green buildings. We have LEED certifications across new construction, commercial interiors existing buildings, operations, and LEED for homes, and LEED for healthcare. When I was hired, there was one LEED certification in the UC system, and we're now over 350 LEED certifications. In terms of where green building is going a couple of years ago, we required all new buildings

to be all electric or at least electric for space and water heating to take advantage of the fact that we have developed carbon free electricity sourcing for our campuses. If our new buildings are all electric, that means they're carbon neutral or will be within the next four years. So that's one of our big recent direction moving towards electrifying all of our buildings

Charlie ([09:36](#)):

And aligned with the California legislation right there. I got a couple of guests on the podcasts or Matt, Dan Burgoyne and some others that have really spoken to where California is going over the next 5 to 10 years so it's great. You're already aligned ahead of it. 350 LEED projects. Let's look back on the highlight reel. Do any of those projects in particular stand out really proud of one or two? Are there some others that you pushed the envelope on? Career wise, what else is on the highlight reel? What are you really proud of?

Matt ([10:06](#)):

Well, in terms of LEED, I think most proud of the UC Merced Campus. It's the 10th and newest UC campus opened in 2005. It's, as far as I know, as we know, the only university campus in the country or the world where every single building is LEED certified, including all of the residence halls. Every student that lives on that campus lives in a LEED certified building, studies in a LEED certified library and goes to a class or into lab and LEED certify academic and laboratory or buildings. We've really showed what can be done with that campus and last month they announced they've achieved carbon neutrality for that campus as of their 2018 year emissions. Seven years ahead of our 2025 goal for all of our UC Campuses to be carbon neutral.

Charlie ([10:59](#)):

That's very inspiring, makes you want to go back to school on a campus like that. Help us understand it's such a big organization. Maybe you didn't mandate that, but you set it up for success. Did some at that campus, in charge of those buildings, take it further. I look at a large company like an Apple or someone like that and of course in Amazon, but in your case, 200,000 buildings, 300,000 students, like how did that come to be? Who said, 'Hey, we're going to do that at this campus?'

Matt ([11:28](#)):

So that campus was already moving in and committed to that direction before the system-wide policy was adopted, before my position was created. When the policy was adopted, it was based in part on what you see Merced said was showing was possible. My job in part was to help them realize that vision that they'd set from founding. They had some visionary first chancellor. They also had access to a system-wide research Institute that helped create my position, at the California Institute for Energy and Environment, which developed the standards for that building and pioneered whole building benchmark based energy performance targets that were used for every building on that campus. Every building on that campus uses 50% or less energy than comparable buildings on other campuses across the state. They had a lot of support from UCS research enterprise and from my new office when that was created. Yeah,

Charlie ([12:33](#)):

Thanks for showing us how that came to be. Anything else you want to shout out? What else are you proud of?

Matt ([12:41](#)):

Well, I'm proud that we've expanded that initial green building, clean energy policy into a comprehensive sustainable practices policy. We're now up to 11 sections starting with those first two. We've got goals and other sections like carbon neutrality by 2025 and the climate section zero waste. In the zero waste section we cover water, transportation, procurement food and we're about to add a health and wellbeing section that will integrate a health and all policies approach throughout our policy. We're developing a diversity equity and inclusion section and approach to integrate that in center equity throughout all of our policy as well. I'm proud that we've made a comprehensive policy. We have the most renewable energy of any university in the country over 100 onsite solar installations. Plus we created our own electric utility, which is carbon neutral and the electricity, it supplies to our campuses as of 2019. We've done a lot, but we still have a long way to go. A lot of challenges ahead.

Charlie ([13:50](#)):

Can't wait to learn more about what's next. Why don't you take us there? Why don't you talk a little bit about how do you raise the bar? What is next, what's keeping you busy today in your role, if you would, Matt. Let us know what you guys are working on.

Matt ([14:06](#)):

Well, some of the frontiers right now, I already mentioned electric buildings, but within that, I'm very excited. UC Irvine is building a new medical complex campus, the new hospital and clinical and research facilities. They've figured out how to do it all electric including for humidification and sterilization. Those frontiers of figuring out how to electrify the harder to do systems, that's an exciting new challenge. We are developing ways to daylight, make more visible the energy and carbon costs and impacts for our building starting with operational carbon. Hopefully, moving then into embodied carbon and helping our leadership understand the decisions they're making on that front. The third thing on the green building side is we are working with our researchers and some outside firms to use downscale climate models to develop a data set that would inform the building of new buildings based on future climate reality is not past climate data that's no longer relevant.

Matt ([15:17](#)):

Stormwater events, for heating and cooling days based that on future climate realities. I'm excited about that on the green building front. The other aspect of the work that is a new, challenging, exciting frontier is our work on diversity equity and inclusion, anti-racism, environmental justice and climate justice. We're funding a system-wide climate resilience planning effort in which we've engaged a consultant that centers equity in their work. They led in the development of an equitable climate action plan for the city of Oakland, where my office is located. We'll be leading all of our campuses and medical centers through a climate resilience process that centers equity. I'm excited related to that then to UC Merced campus is just launched a center for climate justice. I'm very involved in working with the faculty director to develop some priorities for the UC system for around climate justice, across research, education, public service, and our operations. Similarly, UCSFs, they're planning to launch a center for climate and health. So climate justice and health being very important frames and

focal points for work on climate action and sustainability. I'm excited. We're tapping into our research expertise in enterprise there to help provide leadership. I already mentioned, we're incorporating diversity equity and inclusion throughout our sustainability policy and our carbon neutrality initiative and learning a lot along the way, and bringing different voices to the floor then have been involved in the past.

Charlie ([16:59](#)):

Matt just that the equity, the inclusion, the anti-racism, it's amazing. You're baking that in. We have to do so much better there, but the sustainability front, I definitely echo that shift from operational carbon to embodied carbon. I mean, you're doing it. Is there a team around you? Can you tell us a little more about the structure there and how you're able to get some things done?

Matt ([17:21](#)):

Very fortunate to get in on the ground floor and ride the green building wave and ride the sustainability and sustainability in higher education wave. There's one LEED certification when I was hired, there's also one sustainability professional in the UC system when I was hired, same campus, UC Santa Barbara, that that person had helped do their first LEED certification, first LEED platinum lab building in the world. What I've done is helped each campus develop a sustainability office and hire their first sustainability director. Now there are a team of four of us, the system office, the UCF, the president that LEED a network of 42 full-time sustainability staff across the UC system. We of course also work with many others on campus, like the zero waste to recycling managers, energy managers, the dining services, facilities, management, planning, design, construction, et cetera. We've got a team of four of us and then a system-wide team or network of 42 of us right now. It's a big team

Charlie ([18:23](#)):

Got a lot of work to do. Anything else we should be reading up on. Now, if there's someone listening to this podcast, you've mentioned some things, obviously we're still in the middle of the pandemic as you and I are recording this podcast, but healthy billings are upon us. I don't know

anything else that maybe your team keeps an eye on, you see a trend coming, anything else that you could share?

Matt ([18:45](#)):

Well, I think in terms of trends, I think we've touched on definitely electrification, electric buildings, definitely wellness and equity, diversity inclusion, anti-racism work and resilience, which relates to all of those things. I think those are some of the biggest trends that we're seeing and trying to work on.

Charlie ([19:05](#)):

Talk about you a little bit more. What would you say is your specialty?

Matt ([19:09](#)):

That's a good and interesting question. I think what I've found that I'm good at is listening and using listening skills to understand where people are coming from and in so doing build the coalitions and the consensus, that's been able to get the whole large, diverse UC system to move in one direction with these sustainability goals. I think that listening and building coalitions and consensus consensus may be my specialty or gift.

Charlie ([19:41](#)):

Pro tips about that. I'm working on being an even better listener myself. Is it the pause before you speak, is it to use someone's name so they know you're paying attention? You're listening. Are there any subtle tips on maybe how to be a better listener?

Matt ([19:57](#)):

Definitely a core fundamental skill that I learned early on is this the act of listening? Repeating back to people, what you think you heard to make sure you understand what they're trying to say and make them feel heard? One of the first lessons I learned in my job is that before people are open to change at all, they need to feel recognized for what they have done. When I speak to a campus, I always make sure to start by recognizing and thanking them for everything they are doing on sustainability, which then lowers their defenses. When I follow that with, and you need to do this, here's where you could do more. Here's where others are doing something that you're not

doing. If I don't start with listening, recognizing where they're coming from, what they are doing, then they're not really open to change.

Charlie ([20:48](#)):

Fantastic advice. Thanks for following that up. Let's talk about bucket list, Matt. As you and I get to know each other, I'm actually a fan of the bucket list. What are one or two things maybe on your bucket list when it's good to travel again? Maybe some adventure, maybe write a book who knows, wonder one or two things on the bucket list.

Matt ([21:05](#)):

I don't have a personal bucket list, not a bucket list person. I'm more into relationships than destinations. When I travel, I travel to visit people and reconnect with people. I guess that's why I'm good at building coalitions and consensus and say I'm all about relationships and people. But I would love to learn how to play the guitar at some point. I think that that might be a bucket list type thing.

Charlie ([21:32](#)):

I love it. Well, give us one destination. Where's a friend or an acquaintance that when you want to travel again, you're going.

Matt ([21:39](#)):

Yeah. Although there are many built up travel desire for all of us as we've been cooped up. Right? So, I mean, first off though, I'd love to go back to the Czech Republic where I live for the two years, 1998 to 2000 I had, since I came back in 2000, I had gone back every three or four years, but the last time I've been, there was 2010 before I got married and became a parent. I Love to take my son and my wife back to the Czech Republic, see where I lived and meet my friends there.

Charlie ([22:10](#)):

What a great trip. Wow. That's going to be amazing. Tell us about books. Is there a book or two you'd recommend?

Matt ([22:18](#)):

Back to the theme of diversity equity inclusion, anti-racism work. White fragility is a book that all of us in our UC sustainability officer community have been reading and discussing for those of us who identify as white. It's really important to understand why we get defensive, especially those of us who care about racial justice and want to think of ourselves as enlightened people who support racial justice and equity to realize that we all participate in systemic racism and say things that are racist often without realizing it. So that book really helps give us a common frame of reference and a language to process our own guilt and shame, and be open to talking openly about racism and for folks who don't identify as white, as people of color can still be useful to understand why white people have such a hard time talking about racism and recognizing their role in systems that perpetuate racism.

Charlie ([23:24](#)):

Yeah. Great advice. I read that and it gives good examples of privilege that maybe people haven't recognized in the past and it's a tool to have these conversations. So good book. I'll put that link in the podcast show notes. Two questions, man, as we come to a close. First one. Career-Wise any advice you wished to have a little earlier in your career?

Matt ([23:46](#)):

I don't know. I've been fortunate, have a lot of good mentors, but one thing I think I would have liked to have had earlier in my career is find a formal mentor and a coach. I learned over time that wow, some of the most amazing people that I work with, I think they've got all figured out. They've got a coach who is helping them with their leadership set, definitely finding mentors, finding a coach. Find people you can learn from in general. Don't be afraid to take risks. Definitely listen, especially learn to listen to voices that too often haven't been listened to or the coach find the mentor advice.

Charlie ([24:29](#)):

In closing, let's say there's someone listening right now. That's just now jumping into the green building movement. Matt, any words of encouragement for them?

Matt ([24:38](#)):

You're entering the movement at an exciting time. Green buildings sort of at the center of work to address the climate crisis to address the health and wellbeing crisis can play a role in addressing inequities and racial injustice. If you think of the built environment as a whole, and the role that systemic racism has played in housing and infrastructure. I think it's an exciting time where people can make a really big impact on a number of societal grand challenges.

Charlie ([25:11](#)):

Very encouraging. Great talk. It seemed like it went by quickly. I know everybody listening is encouraged and probably wanted to go check out more of your great building work you and your team have done. Just want to say congrats on your successes. Thanks for your time on the podcast today. I really enjoyed it. Thank you. I enjoyed it too. Thanks for having me.

Charlie ([25:31](#)):

I just want to say thank you to our loyal listeners. We actually are celebrating over one year here on the Green Building Matters Podcast. Me and the entire team were stoked and just so glad to continue to listen every Wednesday morning to a new interview with a green building professional here in this industry, or just some pro tips that we want to make sure that you are getting straight from us straight to you. Thank you for listening to this episode of the green building matters projects@gbs.com. Our mission is to advance the green building movement through best in class education and encouragement. Remember, you can go to gbes.com/podcast for any notes and links that we mentioned in today's episode. You can actually see the other episodes that have already been recorded with our amazing, yes. Please tell your friends about this podcast, tell your colleagues, and if you really enjoyed it, leave a positive review on iTunes. Thank you so much. And we'll see you in next week's episode.