

Regional Sustainability Manager at Turner Construction - Mike Bahr | Transcript

Welcome to Green Building Matters, the original and most popular podcast focused on the green building movement. Your host is Charlie Cichetti, one of the most credentialed experts in the green building industry and one of the few to be honored as a LEED Fellow. Each week, Charlie welcomes a green building professional from around the globe to share their war stories, career advice, and unique insight into how sustainability is shaping the built environment. So settle in, grab a fresh cup of coffee, and get ready to find out why Green Building Matters.

00:33

Charlie

Hey, everybody. Welcome to the next episode of the Green Building Matters podcast. Every week, I just have an easy job. I get to meet super cool people in the green building movement. Some I've known for years. Some of them are kind of new friends, new acquaintances, and I've got a growing relationship here with Mike, who is doing some amazing green building projects on the construction side, and I can't wait to unpack his story. Mike, how are you doing today?

00:56

Mike

I'm doing good, Charlie. How are you?

00:58

Charlie

Feeling good today. I can't wait to talk a little more about the work you're doing. Turner is a big education customer of ours and gbes.com and so

definitely have known a lot of the team there for a long time. I've seen the growing sustainability team and just excited to hear what's the latest. So take us back, though. I love to ask my podcast guests hey, where'd you grow up and where'd you go to school?

01:22

Mike

I grew up in the frigid state of North Dakota, so just about as far north as you can get. I was born and raised there, and spent my life there until I graduated high school. I went to college in a small town in southeast Idaho, where I went for construction management and then kind of started my career out in California when that wrapped up.

01:43

Charlie

Did you always know you wanted to maybe get into construction or what kind of pushed you in that direction?

01:50

Mike

I really had no idea. That was honestly a decision I made on the fly while I was in college, as I was feeling all those pressures all the college kids do, and what the heck am I going to do for the rest of my life? Just kind of on a whim, with some minor encouragement from my dad, I signed up for a couple CM classes and just fell in love with it right away.

02:11

Charlie

And the rest is history. This is the Green Building Matters podcast. In a little bit, we're going to talk a lot about sustainability, but when did you first see sustainability or green buildings or LEED? When did that start showing up for you?

02:25

Mike

I would say my sustainability journey has kind of been a slow burn for quite a long time. A lot of our counterparts tend to have an aha moment. Maybe growing up in North Dakota, that's not necessarily a landscape that people think of as beautiful. There's no mountains, it's snowy, it's windy. But there's just this incredible variety of life and biodiversity inside an amazing ecosystem. And I was raised as a boy Scout, so I spent a lot of my time hiking and camping and canoeing and enjoying nature. And that was just kind of part of our family identity and who we were. I think what jump started this green building movement is I had that as part of me.

03:09

Mike

And in my senior year of college, in my CM classes, I took a sustainable design and construction class, which was most. It was mostly patterned around the LEED framework. LEED V4 was relatively new, so we mostly followed the structure of LEED v4, learned about the credits and more than anything, tried to learn why somebody would even want to pursue that credit. Right. What problem is it trying to solve? And that kind of really opened my eyes into this need that we have for green buildings.

03:43

Charlie

I wish they had some LEED classes. When I was at Georgia Tech, LEED had just come out. I graduated about 2004. And then I've just been admiring all these great programs that definitely teach green buildings. But LEED as you know and I know and our listeners know is it's a great framework to at least start with. It makes a lot of sense and not every building can do it and might as well just go all in there and then you can take it further if you want. Okay, so that's kind of how you got a little bit in

the sustainability, but still construction side of things. Tell us about some of those early construction jobs. What kind of projects were you working on?

04:20

Mike

I've had an interesting construction career. I would say it. In the short span I've been in this industry. So when I was in college, the first real job sites I ever went on, ironically enough now, were oil and gas projects. I did two internships with a contractor down in Southern California where they were stationed on the oil fields and were dropping in pipe and building a lot of the industrial processes that help those big Oil companies get the oil out of the ground and make it sellable. I did a final internship in college up in Northern California for a separate contractor where I worked on a hospital. Three story new healthcare project. It was really cool. That was really the first building site I ever went on and it was great.

05:07

Mike

I went back to work for that company when I graduated college. And any of your listeners who are familiar with healthcare in California know that it is about the slowest construction type out there. And so I actually did the internship, went back for a year of school, graduated, came back and went back to that hospital project and got to finish it, which is pretty cool. I've worked on a lot of other stuff since then. I did a 10 story class A office space in California. During COVID we relocated our family to Northern Minnesota where I worked as a PM and estimator for a very regional builder. And so I had a very different style of construction. It was very low bid, public work, lots of apartments, historic renovation very local, locally focused. And then I've, in my role at Turner, I've touched all kinds of projects from data centers to hospitals to sports stadiums and just about everything out there.

06:07

Charlie

I've seen Turner pick up a lot of big projects too. Those stadiums are great. Rams. That's one of the projects.

06:17

Mike

We did that one.

06:19

Charlie

Amazing. Okay, so construction, sustainability to kind of look back so far on this career have you had any mentors along the way?

06:29

Mike

Thankfully I've kind of been privileged to work with a lot of really great people technically proficient, just good people in general. But one who stands out is a project manager I worked with very closely in my time in Northern California. She was the PM of the healthcare job I was on as an intern. I worked with her again after graduation and then when that job wrapped up, she pulled me along to the next one. She was scarily good at being a project manager, sometimes a little bit intimidating, but she was so focused on developing people and giving them opportunities. I hadn't expressed. I didn't express an interest in sustainability since starting at that company and that 10 story class A office space I went to with her was pursuing LEED WELL and living building challenges. She dragged me along with her and said, you asked for it, so you're in charge of all the sustainability. And so she was great at developing people and Giving us the opportunities.

07:30

Charlie

What's her name?

07:31

Mike

Stephanie Jones Lee.

07:33

Charlie

Fantastic, man. What a great opportunity there. Anyone else you had mentioned, I think your dad there nudged you in that CM direction, but anyone else maybe either followed their material, saw them from there on stage, or maybe someone that really did open doors for any other mentors?

07:50

Mike

I would say in this sustainability space. I don't know her personally, but so many people love and listen to Katherine Hayhoe. She has a very unique approach in how she communicates these topics with people, especially those who may not share the same opinions as her. And I really appreciate her style. And as I can, I try to mimic her communication approaches because they seem to be very respectful of individuals, but also firm in recognizing what we need to do.

08:19

Charlie

Great. I think it's very important to give the mentors shout out one more look back. Mike, what's on the highlight reel? What are some of your proudest accomplishments so far?

08:28

Mike

Yeah, so that triple crown sustainability project I mentioned with LEED, WELL, Living Building Challenge up to that point, I had not actually managed any green building certification process at all. Talk about jumping

off the deep end. It wasn't just LEED, but all of it was thrown at me at once and I'd like to think we did reasonably well as a team. And I played a part in stitching that program together. I'm very proud of how all of that went as well. My time in Minnesota was really fulfilling as well. I worked in a smaller style of construction. I worked very closely with the clients. Many of my clients that I built for were small business owners who were putting their livelihoods on the line. Build the next part of their business and we gotta come along with them. And just having that level of relationship with a client was fulfilling and something that I've I strive to do moving forward.

09:26

Charlie

Way to go. Credentials. That's been a big part of my green building career. I know you have a lot of credentials. You know, when did you start picking those up? Can you speak a little bit to the importance of maybe getting some of these credentials?

09:38

Mike

I mentioned in college, the final exam was to actually go out and get your elite GA. And so that's where that started. And then once I graduated and got in the workforce and didn't feel like I was drowning with being a new A recent grad went and got my LEED AP, BD and C. And then as I moved on to that Living Building Challenge project, I went to get that Living Future accreditation as well. They're so important in this journey. I think they help us as individuals shed a little bit of imposter syndrome, maybe. We can walk the talk a little bit. We know the lingo. It's a designation that we're putting effort in on it. And then of course, there's just the technical knowledge and proficiency that comes along with that.

10:24

Charlie

Mike, let's talk about the present day. Tell us a little bit more about Turner's

approach to sustainability. You're there in Des Moines. You're the regional sustainability manager. What does sustainability mean inside of your large construction firm? And tell us more about a day in the life of Mike right now.

10:42

Mike

I really provide sustainability leadership for four of our offices. Denver, Omaha, Des Moines and Kansas City. It's a really interesting role because there is such a spectrum of sustainability culture and behavior across that area. Denver, Denver and Colorado are kind of like California and that they're interested in legislation legislating and passing laws in this vein. Kansas City surprised me as I got involved with them. They are much further along in sustainability than I would have thought, but they take a very different approach. It's not a state level approach. It's a lot of the local counties and cities, and it's very grassroots. And then Omaha and Nebraska and Des Moines and Iowa tend to be in places that aren't as sustainability forward or may not be as interested in some of these topics. I get this really wide range of experience and culture, and I have to take our national program that is really agnostic of where we live and try to achieve things like electric construction equipment or embodied carbon reductions or LEED certification or whatever it is. I spent a lot of my time, most of my time working directly with our clients and with our teams to really figure out how we achieve some of these things. How we go about reducing embodied carbon in Iowa and in Nebraska is going to have different steps and different wins and different losses than our teams would. And California or Florida or Nashville, just because the cultures in the market are.

12:22

Charlie

So different, what's harder to do with sustainability in those regions? Back in the day, it'd be hard to get someone that recycled some of our construction materials for Example, or get a certain new material to build out of or the certain skilled trades. But has that come a long way? So

there's still a few challenges in those regions. I would say at least the four locations I work with, they've all got their things they're really good at and things they struggle with. Iowa, which is where I'm based, still has a hard time with recycling. There's not commingled facilities. It's just challenging to do. But we're actually pretty sharp here on embodied carbon. Most of our ready mixed plants have had EPDs for several years, so the market really knows how to tackle that problem. If I go to Kansas City instead. Kansas City does great with recycling, but. But not so much with embodied carbon. And so every place has its. Its own little flavor.

13:19

Charlie

Thanks for giving us a peek into that region. Still, still a little bit kind of present day where as the time we're recording this podcast, we've got LEED version five coming out, LEED updates every five or so years. And there's some pretty major changes coming. There's WELL and healthy buildings and fit. WELL, you mentioned a living building. How do you navigate with clients? Like the different options?

13:41

Mike

There is so much to do in sustainability and so many topics. I try to take the approach of trying to make it as simple for them as possible and really understand the client. And if they have a sustainability interest, why is there an ESG component where they need to prove something out to a stakeholder or a parent company? then a building rating system makes a ton of sense. Are they really invested in the local community? Let's start thinking about the fuel we use on the job site and if we can cut down air pollution and if we can support the economy through recycling. So it's like so much in our careers it is. It's really driven by the client and their needs.

14:28

Mike

And I just really tried to sift through all the different things we could throw at them and figure out which one or two make the most sense for what they're looking for.

14:36

Charlie

When it comes to greening up your construction phases, we've had Turner on some of our educational webinars and talk about how to green up the construction phase. Arguably a four, a five. Not just better embodied carbon, focus on the actual materials. But hey, what's our impact during construction? Are you seeing more and more of that? Is that ever coming from the client side? I know a lot of the big tech companies want that, maybe with some of their sites. But, what about Turner too? What's your stance on continuing to green up, maybe even benchmark your own construction sites? How's that going?

15:08

Mike

We measure the on site energy and fuel use for a large portion of our jobs. That's part of our company ESG program and we naturally actively want to reduce those emissions. That's the right thing to do. It's also tied to our ESG commitments. And then we certainly have some clients who are asking for that as an emissions reduction strategy. You mentioned the tech sector. They are probably the biggest asker of that. I look at that and it's very similar to electric vehicles, passenger vehicles, where there's emissions reductions. But what most people find interesting with passenger EVs is the air pollution component and limiting that PM and that NOx.

15:56

Mike

And so I've been working hard with a lot of our healthcare clients to look at electric construction equipment as a way to create healthier communities by limiting that air pollution. So we're absolutely continuing to develop in

that area. Push. We know many of the large construction OEMs out there and we're constantly asking for them to give us more and we partner with them on pilots. And you know, I really tried to take this stance demonstrating what is possible so that others can mimic it and we can really impact the whole industry and not just our job sites.

16:33

Charlie

You're leading the way there. Others need to catch up with the greening of our construction sites. So for our listeners, make sure you're checking out not just the embodied carbon on the materials, which still have some room for improvement and the operating carbon when we set up that energy efficient building. But don't forget that construction phase too. So it's good stuff, Mike. Let's talk about the future. I'd love to ask someone like you just, hey, what are you excited about? What are you reading up on what's next in this green building movement?

17:02

Mike

Man, if only I had a crystal ball that I wish for, but I think there are two big emerging topics that are really interesting to me. Not saying other topics aren't emerging, but one of them is biodiversity. Even in the last year we've seen so many clients and industry stakeholders start to want to talk about biodiversity. We've seen some regulation out of Europe around biodiversity net gain. Just yesterday I was talking with the green service provider about how they're starting to develop biodiversity assessments as one of their offerings with really this idea of making sure that our buildings positively contribute to biodiversity, or we leverage the building materials or the sitescape to support biodiversity. I don't know if I would call this next one an emerging topic, cause we've been talking about it forever.

17:55

Mike

But circularity and circular economy. A lot of people talk about circularity as a tool to reduce embodied carbon, which it certainly is. It's valid in and of itself. Just because it reduces embodied carbon isn't the only reason we need circularity. All the negatives that come along with building materials emissions, maybe labor concerns in other countries, problems at the landfill. We can help solve every one of those issues through circularity. And I think we're going to kind of see this coming together around circular materials as an opportunity to solve multiple problems at one time.

18:37

Charlie

And I'm really glad you brought back circularity and the biodiversity and these things that we have been talking about for a long time. But maybe some of it was the pandemic that forced us into is this a healthy building or not? Or maybe other programs. It seems like some of these are coming back around because they're still super important. So that's good stuff. And maybe there's not one rating system that maxes those out. Maybe that's still missing a little bit, so that we're all looking at it. Where do you suggest people kind of read up on that? Or is there a really cool project? You think that's got it right? Any tips there on where to learn a little more about those topics?

19:13

Mike

I'm still in Turner, still learning about biodiversity. So much of that is impacted by where the building goes. If we're a builder we don't get to influence that all the time. But like I mentioned, we've seen a lot of movement coming out of Europe. So there's some legislation and regulation that's been put in place around that I think people can look at. And then of course, everybody's starting to talk about circularity. Deconstruction naturally is a huge part of that and designed for disassembly. So these topics seem to just kind of get sprinkled into everything we're already doing already. I don't know if there's any like one

resource to go to other than to make sure we all kind of read up on these things as we see them.

19:59

Charlie

Thank you. I really want to guide our listeners towards where can you see it? And you're right, sometimes we're influencing things on the rest of the world and sometimes Europe. A little bit back towards us on some of the overall specialty areas of green buildings we need to focus on. Let's kind of keep rolling here. Let's talk a little bit more about, man, what kind of helps you stay super productive and some of your best talents. I like to ask this question next: hey, what would you say is your specialty or gift?

20:27

Mike

Oh, boy, that's a hard question. I do a good job, and I really try to keep things as simple as possible. All of us green building practitioners, we're not solving these issues on our own. Especially me as a general contractor. I've got superintendents and project managers and estimators and general managers. And the reality is that sustainability may or may not be on their priority list. And at the same time, we have these huge, complex topics that sometimes you feel like you need a master's degree to understand. And so I try to take the approach of taking these challenging, complex topics and figuring out how I can simplify it down into a yes or a no for somebody. It's very simple to them what I'm asking. It's a simple process. And then I always try to look for an existing process or workflow that person is already doing that I can just slide my sustainability stuff onto, as opposed to asking them to start something new completely being respectful of their time and their work in helping them to focus on the core stuff that they enjoy. That's why I take that approach.

21:40

Charlie

That's good, man. Thank you. I can tell that already just kind of talking to you here, where you light up around that. Do you have any good habits or routines or rituals that really help you stay on point?

21:52

Mike

I would say inbox management probably is the number one. I take a different inbox management approach than a lot of people where I treat my inbox like my to do list. So if I've responded to the email or done the action I need to take, I get it out of there, I delete it, I archive it, and I treat that as my to do list. And if I. And if I get an email that I can respond to accurately and in under two minutes, I typically respond to that as soon as I can and just get it done, get it out of the way and go back to working on the really big stuff. And that's worked really well for me.

22:26

Charlie

That's getting things done. That theory around that. I like it. David Allen, I believe, had some of that two minute rule. So I like to ask about bucket lists. Not everybody has a bucket list, but maybe you do. Is there any adventure travel? Write a book one day? I don't know. Give us a peek into the bucket list.

22:46

Mike

Definitely not writing a book, but yeah, I love the national park system and so part of my bucket list is to visit all of the national parks before I retire. Which I'm still pretty early on in my career, so I've got a few decades to go, but I want to visit all them before I retire and that spend a portion of my retirement working at one of the parks and just kind of being immersed in nature every day.

23:13

Charlie

You have that national park pass where you can go to any of them or. I've heard about that.

23:18

Mike

Yeah, we do. Usually as a family, every summer we take a week long trip to a national park. I've been to Yellowstone a bunch of times, but took my two little daughters there earlier this year. And then next year we're heading over to Great Smokies and just spend a week camping and enjoying it.

23:38

Charlie

Include the family there too, man, and get back, connect with nature. Sounds like you had some of that with your upbringing too, there in the Dakota. Is there a book you'd recommend to our listeners? It doesn't have to be about buildings or a documentary or just a TED Talk. I don't know anything to recommend right now.

23:56

Mike

I don't know that I have any that jumped to mind. One I read this year that I really enjoyed and really enjoyed was called Bury the Chain by Adam Hofschild. I can't remember how to pronounce it, but he documents the earliest efforts in Britain to abolish slavery, which happened around the time of the American Revolution. And what's really interesting about it is, of course it's factual, but he really takes the approach of highlighting how that community did grassroots organizing and how they communicated with people. And it's very obvious that part of the intent of that book was to people like us who need to advocate for certain things around climate change or sustainability. It was well written and I enjoyed it and it was enjoyable in and of itself.

24:46

Charlie

We'll put a link to that book. I've got it pulled up here. We'll put that in our podcast. Show notes, everybody. Check out that great recommendation here by Mike. Thanks, man, that's great. A couple more things as we start to wind down. I've enjoyed getting to know you here and what you've got going on, the fun projects you've worked on, the responsibilities you have there for offices, and then some challenges, but we got to push for the sustainability as you look back on your career, is there any career advice you wish you'd have known earlier?

25:13

Mike

There's one that jumps to the top of mind. I don't know that it would have changed my trajectory, but I wish I had it sooner. In the green building space, you don't have to be a dedicated full time sustainability person to make a difference. Those of us who are, we need architects and clients and superintendents and project managers and estimators who lay the foundation and advocate and really clear the road for us to implement a lot of these things. I have lots of young folks within Turner who always come up to me, say, man, I love sustainability. I wish I could have your job. There's just not any out there.

25:54

Mike

And I try to remind them that you can be just as big of a change maker in sustainability by being a really good project manager or whatever role you do want to be in.

26:06

Charlie

That's great leadership you've got there. Because sometimes, especially a

young professional passionate about the movement, wants to work for a company that's mission driven, like turn doing, but you think you're working on one project and am I really making a difference? And the answer is yes. I mean, not just from the. Who else are you going to influence? Maybe that client does LEED again and again or just if you added up the kilowatt hours, maybe that you influence. You got to sometimes remind them. No, Add it up. It's a cumulative total. So that's great leadership there, Mike.

26:35

Mike

Absolutely.

26:36

Charlie

Let's say there is someone just now jumping in to the green building movement. Maybe they're making a career change. Maybe they're a young professional just going for their elite green associates. They're just jumping in. Any words of encouragement for them as we come to a close?

26:52

Mike

Go out and find your people. USGBC chapters, Carbon Leadership Forum, the networks, some places that these people might be like in Iowa or Nebraska or Dakota, there's not a big green building community. So just find somebody doing something green. Like you're going to have similar interests. Maybe they're in fashion or they're in something else. Just kind of find those people, get to know each other, work together. This is not, this is fulfilling work, but it is challenging and there are a lot of obstacles. And just having those people you can spend some time with are that's really helpful and important.

27:32

Charlie

I agree. Find that community, even if it's a small group where you are and good points too. Even across industry. Just like minded making a difference here. the green building movement does not just lead all these other programs. It's been good to you, it's been good to me. To our listeners. Hey, make sure you connect with Mike on LinkedIn. Let them know what you thought of the interview. Check out some of the amazing case studies. I know that Turner really does a great job of showcasing and sharing their best practices. And I just want to say, hey, thank you for listening. Mike. Thanks for being on the podcast today and keeping up.

28:01

Mike

Thanks, Charlie.

28:02

Charlie

Thank you, sir. Thanks so much.

28:05

Speaker 4

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