



**Craig Fahle Show**  
**Re-envisioning 8 Mile**

**Jan. 26, 2010**

[http://wdet.org/audio/craigfahle/1/CFS\\_1-26\\_full.MP3](http://wdet.org/audio/craigfahle/1/CFS_1-26_full.MP3)

**Craig Fahle:** As you heard in the intro, I referred to 8 Mile sort of as the city's largest metaphor. It pretty much is. It's a metaphor for the separation between city and suburb, economic opportunity and decline. It's...8 Mile. There's movies made with the name. It's become iconic. The road has value though, if you drive up and down 8 mile, there's still a lot happening on that road. It's of course the big dividing line, but it's also one of the most important commercial corridors in southeast Michigan.

This group, The Quell Group, was contracted by Michigan department of Transportation to re-imagine 8 Mile. My guest right now is Scott Clein of The Quell Group, and they finished their initial reviews about what can be done. Welcome.

**Scott Clein:** Actually I'm with Giffels-Webster, an engineering firm that worked with MDOT.

**Fahle:** I appreciate the correction. So re-imagining 8 mile, what do we need to re-imagine? It is a road, it was called Baseline because it ran the power lines right down the middle of it for a big bulk of its location, it's a county-dividing line. And it's a huge commercial corridor. What do we need to re-imagine?

**Clein:** Well I think first of all you need to not think of it as a roadway or a corridor. It's a public space. And there's one thing with my years of working in and around metro Detroit is our public spaces – in many instances are our parks, our plazas, our roadway corridors – are really the front doors to our community. It's what visitors see, what impacts residents' lives on a daily basis. Instead of thinking, "what can we do with this roadway?" let's think about, "what do we do with this public space?"

It was the baseline, not so much because of the power lines, which dominate now, but because back even in the time of the Louisiana Purchase, it was determined at the federal level that we needed to have survey baselines to establish townships. In fact if you follow Baseline Road, 8 Mile, across Lake Michigan, it forms the boundary of Wisconsin and Illinois.

The thing we have to take a look at is what do we want our public spaces to be? In the last segment you talked a bit about re-imagining Michigan, transforming Michigan...someone mentioned our infrastructure is failing, so what do we do? It's going to be a big deal. There was talk of transit. We tend to live in a bit of a silver-bullet mentality in southeastern Michigan. If we get transit, we'll be fine. Five years ago it was the stadiums, when we put that in, everything will be fine. Before that may have been the casinos...the RenCen. So look at maybe the smaller, more impactful things that we can do. And if we're going to have to replace our infrastructure, what do we want it to look like?

Do we want to build it on a 19<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> century model? Do we want to look at what people today want? Both from a marketing point of view of how to get people back in the community to keep our young professionals here, but maybe also from a social justice point of view, frankly, with the number of people that don't own vehicles. Along with the fact that it is irrefutable that public spaces in urban communities are held to a different aesthetic standard than more affluent communities or suburban communities, and that's just not right.

Everyone has a right to a public space that expresses who we are, that provides them that vibe, that pulse that a city can provide above all others. We need to start thinking about how can we re-imagine all of these spaces. 8 Mile, being as iconic as it is both locally and nationally, is one of those few streets around Michigan. You have Michigan, Woodward, Gratiot, Grand River. So you have these opportunities, these five or six streets that really define who we are. And really tell our history, how we got to where we are now. As a big fan of history myself, we need to understand the context of where we are before we decide how we're going to move forward.

That's where this project was a great opportunity to do just that.

**Fahle:** Give me a sense for what you envision. Converting this from just a roadway as you say to a public space... it's a forbidding public space with cars whizzing by 50 to 60 miles an hour, no way to cross the street first of all if you're a pedestrian or a cyclist...How do you create public space out of something that's basically a minor freeway with some driveways?

**Clein:** You've hit the nail right on the head. There's a paradigm in the realm of transportation engineering and more specifically traffic engineering that basically says the more cars we can push by on a particular roadway in a given hour, the better. It doesn't matter the impact on neighboring communities, about bikes, people crossing the street, just more is better. And if we're going to do anything with public spaces in general, we as a society in particular, the people at the municipal level who are guiding us along our planning in funding of roadways, need to understand that there has been a shift, at least in my opinion, in what people want. That old paradigm doesn't work anymore.

You look at that Baseline Road, you look at 8 Mile. There are four lanes of traffic in each direction, plus turn lanes on occasion...that's 10 lanes! This was one of the first –quote– superhighways when it was built, and it was expanded to its current width. In fact, there was an old song, "Coasting the Baseline," because it was one of the first east-west connectors back in the days before our freeways.

But think about how this region has developed. As the 40s and 50s rolled through and our freeway system came to be, frankly our freeway systems are the best in the country, in my opinion in terms of its connectivity to the area, but the purpose of roadways like Baseline, like Woodward, has changed significantly. It used to be the only means to get from Grosse Pointe to Livonia, but that's not the case anymore. You only do that in the event that 696 is clogged up.

If we can realize and admit that that's the case and have some brave traffic engineers and government officials that sit down and let us take back some of that space, then we'll have an opportunity to have a significant impact on what the corridor looks and feel like. And more importantly, how it interacts with the public and how the public interacts with each other. And how really that spinoff economic development happens.

**Fahle:** This is beyond landscaping and beautifying 8 Mile, which is what a number of people would assume would be part of this project. You're talking about a thorough examination of how it's used and what it should be used for. What kinds of things could happen at intersections, say, like Van Dyke and 8 Mile?

**Clein:** Through the course of our study we did look at overall function and we came up with a recommendation to MDOT that we strongly feel they need to go forward into a more detailed analysis that'll have an impact on slowing traffic down generally. Narrower spaces tend to do that. It also in many cases, reduce those distances someone has to cross the street. If we're able to reduce those distances and then take a look at those intersections as focal points, it could be as simple as landscaping and signage. It could be as detailed as decorative pavements. It's about re-imagining the configuration to allow for controlled speed and walkability, but also fostering

outdoor cafes and other amenities and adjacent land that are inherently impacted by the road and the corridor that they're on.

**Fahle:** Forgive the smart aleck remark, but when people think 8 mile, they're not thinking sidewalk cafés. Unless it's Trumps or Tycoons. We have a number of these types of businesses along the 8 Mile corridor and probably put there because a lot of people drive by them. Is this a situation where you could really create something like that? And there's also a lot of light industrial use, too.

**Clein:** Our analysis of the corridor is it's more of a retail corridor than anything else in its current state. You could argue about what that retail is, but ultimately if we took that tack, and said it's got this certain use in certain areas so we better not worry about it... what issue would we tackle? It might explain why we haven't gotten anywhere.

It comes back to leadership. Leadership from all levels -- public/private -- needs to take us to a place we want to be as a community. My firm, Giffels-Webster, believes the way we can do that is by trying to improve the public spaces, make them a better place to live, to help foster not only the economic development and other angles we discussed, but improve overall quality of life.

**Fahle:** My guest, Scott Clein, about a plan to re-imagine 8 Mile. You had some preliminary work for MDOT. Give me a sense of their commitment. Is it solely a study or is this something they want to go forward with?

**Clein:** It certainly is a study at this point. The reality is we looked at a 20-mile stretch of 8 Mile, all the way from Grand River Ave. to I-94. That's an immense distance if you're looking at any significant infrastructure rehabilitation.

So what I really enjoyed about MDOT's approach about this project is they realize with such a significant project ahead of them, it's best to look high level first...what do we want it to be? It's like when you put a business plan together, what do we want to do, what do we want this to look like? The positive is the study was given the freedom to think outside the box. We were basically told by our project manager at MDOT, make sure it's legal, make sure it's defensible from a safety and good engineering standpoint, but after that it was kind of, go.

They did say the specific things like transmission towers, take a look at what you can do. An interesting idea we had from our landscape architect is not shy away from it. Kind of like what we said with 8 mile. It's 8 mile, deal with it. We're embracing that moniker. Instead of a dividing line, it's something that unifies. All three counties converge at 8 mile.

**Fahle:** Well it will be interesting to see what comes of this. What is the next step?

**Clein:** MDOT is looking to implement specific recommendations to future smaller improvement projects to kind of build as they go along. We're starting work on more detailed plans for landscape improvements and we're having discussions on pushing them toward reducing the number of lanes. But that's where they're at...looking at the smaller ways they can implement things we've recommended.

**Fahle:** You'll likely have the retailer support on the slowdown, but that remains to be seen. Fascinating stuff that you're talking about. Scot Clein of Giffels-Webster on re-imagining 8 mile and we certainly appreciate you being here on the Craig Fahle Show.