# Transcript for the City of Ohio State Podcast Season 4 Episode 1: New Beginnings with Chris Kabourek

The City of Ohio State podcast takes a deep dive into the support services that keep OSU's Columbus campus running 24/7. Hear from industry experts in facilities, construction, real estate, public safety, transportation and more. The City of Ohio State podcast is brought to you by the Office of Administration and Planning. Go bucks. Hello and welcome to the City of Ohio State podcast. I'm your host Dan Hedman.

Our guest this month is Chris Kabourek, who joined Ohio State back in November of 2024 as our new senior vice president for the Office of Administration and Planning. Chris, thanks for being with us. Absolute pleasure to be here. Dan, thank you. We're getting to a point where I can't necessarily call you new to OSU for much longer. Now that you've been at Ohio State for a few months, how does it compare to where you spent a majority of your career, the University of Nebraska? Well, it's funny. I think this is about day 75 for me on the job and in Columbus. And in some ways it feels like day one, in some ways it feels like there's three. So after being at a place like Nebraska for 27 years, I will always this will always be new for me for a while. But it compares very favorably to Nebraska. You know, in Nebraska, we pride ourselves on humble, hardworking being. Nebraska, nice. The tagline in Nebraska. And and that one thing, both my wife and I have noticed that everyone has been so welcoming to us and we feel like we we're going to fit in just fine. And it's been a great two and a half months thus far. That's awesome. I agree with you because I've lived in both Nebraska and Ohio and I feel like the people in both states are great. So I know you grew up in a small town of Nebraska called David City and eventually landed at the University of Nebraska Can you walk us through your career progression in just a few minutes here? Well, then, if you would have told me when I was growing up in Davis City that someday I would become the interim president of my alma mater. You know, I would have laughed at you. I mean, I was a I'm a first generation college student. And so I was you know, I was going to go be, you know, the next NBA player or play for football for the Huskers and go on to the NFL like, you know, or like a lot of other kids dreamed. And so. So this was not like a carefully scripted sequence to plan on to get into higher education and particularly leadership into higher education. So it's been a it's been a meandering journey, but one I wouldn't trade back. I mean, the long story short is, you know, I started my career in banking in Omaha, and my wife at the time was a still a student graduate student at University of Nebraska-Lincoln. And and we were doing the commuting thing back and forth, you know, our day and and we just thought there's got to be a better way to do it. So back in the day, aging myself here when when you still look for jobs in the newspaper and the one dead section there was a I still remember just a very small ad for for budget analysts in the provost office at the university. I had no idea what a provost was. I did know I liked Tusker football and the university. So I thought, well, I least could get tickets. And, you know, then we'll move on to, you know, bigger and better things. And so I was fortunate to get the job and, you know, it was almost immediate as I walked into the office. You know, banking was going through a transformation at that time from being kind of an analytical numbers driven to more sales driven design. But it wasn't exactly what I wanted to do. And but the university seemed to have it all. Oh, I loved the mission and the statewide presence. I think as we'll get into here, universities are some of the most complex institutions that that you can be involved in. I had the opportunity to to talk to a CEO of a Fortune 500 company who was also the interim president at a Big Ten institution. And he said, Chris, like being the CEO of a Fortune 500 company is way easier than managing a university. But you think about all the things we'll do and we'll get into that. It's just an interesting place and had such an impact on on our students and our state. And so they kind of just fell in love with it. And then after that, just just a lot of good luck and a lot of grind as people moved on or retired. I continue to get more experience. You know, it culminated, you know, about a year ago with our board of Regents after, you know, Ted Carter announced he was leaving Nebraska to go to Ohio State, approached me and ask if I would serve in the interim. And and I said I would do whatever I could for the institution and and got to do that. And so it was a great journey. And, you know, like I said, I wouldn't trade it for anything. So that's one of my favorite parts of this podcast. When we have people like you on I did this with Jake Casey before he left. The university is just hearing the journey and the winding road that people take to get where they go. It's just it's you never know where you're going to end up. And I feel like if you put your head down and work hard, anything is possible. So you mentioned working with Ted Carter at Nebraska. How much did he play a role in your interest at Ohio State? I'm guessing a lot. And what can you tell us about the relationship you have with Ohio State's president? Yeah, so I've had the pleasure to work with some really great leaders in higher education. So J.B. Milliken, who is now the chancellor at the University of Texas system, really kind of got me started on my administrative career at Nebraska and was a great mentor and a great friend. And then a gentleman named Dr. Hank Bowers replaced JB. And then he after he left me, we hired this guy named Ted Carter. You know, Ted background on paper immediately resonated with me with his military background at 37 years of serving wearing cloth and serving our country. And and, you know, I grew up in the era of, you know, the original Top Gun with Tom Cruise and, you know, in the eighties. And so when I heard he was a Top Gun instructor and fly in fighter jets off of aircraft carriers, I'm like this guy, this guy's got an interesting background and it's going to be kind of neat to me. And then, you know, when he stepped on campus, day one, you know, he was everything I kind of expected to be in terms of, but. The only thing different, you would think, to be a Top Gun fighter pilot that, you know, he would have just a gigantic ego and be a top down. But he was almost exactly the opposite. He was. He's very unassuming. He's just a common, ordinary guy. And March of 2020, we all started to deal with the thing called COVID and the pandemic. And so, like, while it was kind of like the the classic line, it was the best of times. Worst of times, you know, obviously what was going on with COVID was terrible, but it was a unique professional opportunity for me because I got to spend the next six months and there was a small team of us, President Carter, myself and a few others that sat around a conference room table almost each and every day talking about, you know, how are we going to get the institution back up and running and all those kind of things? And I got to see the incredible leader he is and obviously forged, probably accelerated the forging of the relationship that we had. So fast forward, I kind of already mentioned, you know, selfishly, we were incredibly disappointed when he informed us that he was moving on to Ohio State. You know, obviously very happy for him and Linda and the opportunity. But, you know, sad and and always thought, you know, in the back of my mind, it'd be great to connect with them someday. Little did I know it would happen as soon as it did. I mean, obviously, like I said, I had the honor of serving at the interim president after him. And, you know, Ted and I were pushing a pretty big change agenda at Nebraska. Not that the demographics in Nebraska are much different than Ohio State. We were dealing with enrollment declines, budgetary pressures, all that kind of normal stuff. But, you know, we were really talking about transformation, transforming Nebraska in order to survive, not to thrive. And and so we as I talked to faculty and staff and students, we just said we have to be get comfortable being uncomfortable in some of these discussions or got to go about what the future looks like. Well, as I was transitioning back to after the Nebraska name, the permanent president and I was getting ready to transition back to my my CFO role. You know, I I told my wife one night, I will always remember this. I'm like, I just I feel a little bit, you know, like I, you know, I've been telling everybody we got to get comfortable being uncomfortable. But here we are. We're going to return back to a job we've been doing, you know, 27 plus years. And so that all kind of culminated last summer when when President Carter kind of informed me that, you know, Jay would be retiring and some of the responsibilities in his portfolio were similar to mine. And whether it was an opportunity, you know, he and I could have some conversation with about and and that's really kind of how it started. And so so that's a long answer to your question that Ted Carter played, played a very important role. But I want to make sure I emphasize that it's not just Ted Carter. I mean, it's the Ohio State. For somebody sitting at Nebraska, a fellow peer, Big Ten institution, it was always an institution we aspire to be. So just to have the opportunity to be part of the Ohio State is really the attracting factor for me and my family that Ted Carter just happened to be the president here. It's kind of like icing on the cake. And so, you know, those two things combined. And then once we visited Columbus, just to see the innovative spirit of this of this community and the region and how everyone seemed to be just kind of rowing in the same direction in terms of the excellence goals that they want this university to be. When I when we saw that recipe, we just said, yeah, we would really like to be part of it is given the opportunity. So just really thankful for President Carter on the Board of trustees for giving us this opportunity. And, and we're super excited to really get out and I'll get settled in and get going. Well, now that you're here taking over the Office of Administration and Planning at Ohio State, how does your previous experience and you touched on this a little bit, how does it translate into what your vision for the A&P organization is? I had components of, you know, what A&P does? At Nebraska, you know, facilities within my portfolio, information technology. But can really there were there are some areas that were new to me. Public safety. So in Nebraska we were a system system office was for campus. So public safety was handled more at the at the campus level laws, as you know, operational items like, you know, bussing and parking and and printing services, you know, those were all more operationally done at the campus level. So I've had some experience with some of these items. Some of these items are new to me, which is exciting. I'm excited to kind of see how we do here. But I think the biggest thing I can bring to this job, and I told some of the trustees was, you know, there's two things I think that set me apart from maybe other candidates in the job. And and number one is, you know, I have that relationship with Ted Carter. So the onboarding process is is going to be very quick. It's not nonexistent. And so we spent four years dealing with some really difficult issues. And so we kind of know how each other work. And I think that trust level was one. I was one another as well. Not only accelerate, you know, what we can do with an amp, but hopefully it will support President Carter and the strategic initiatives that he's putting together. You know, as we speak. The second thing I told the, you know, I think I can bring to the table is I've sat in the seat, I've sat in the seat of the president. And until you do that, I mean, it's going to be I'm sure it's like being Ryan Day. Everybody wants to armchair quarterback and should all that player put that blitz on. But until you're in the seat and you really are kind of see all the information coming at you, some of it not publicly available, not even some of it you can share with your leadership team. It's a really different experience. And I just think having that 6 to 9 months of a being a president at a Big Ten institution just gives me a whole new perspective on on what what leadership is thinking, particularly President Carter. So, you know, my goal is to translate all of that, just to continue to support the superb work I've seen a MP do and now have. I've had a chance to kind of at least have a touch with every department here. And and I just no matter if I'm talking about printing services or public safety or transportation and to what I, you know, I've been very impressed with with the team, the A&P team here. So my job is not to break any of that. My job is to try to continue to facilitate and enhance all the goals and things they want to do. But, you know, now I think our job is and I've talked to the team about this is, you know, how do we make the take the next step? I know Ted Carter is here to do big things. I know the trust board of trustees want to take this university to the next level, and we can't do any of that without just excellent operations, efficient operations. And so I look forward to working with the leaders of A&P, develop some strategic plans on on how we do that. And but I've been super impressed that I'm really excited about what we might be able to do going forward. You touched on this, but I want to pull at this a little bit more here. So administration planning, basically the city services at Ohio State. It's why we called the podcast City of Ohio State. Right over these first few months, you shadowed police and public safety during a home football game. Move toward the unit facility, seen facilities. Folks deal with a major winter storm and it's only been, what, 60 days, right. What is your initial impression of the not only the work that takes place in A&P, but some of the people you've already met that are doing it? Yeah. So I think what the common public doesn't understand is how big and how complex of an institution this is. I mean, I'm starting to get the fact that I think we serve 67,000 students and, you know, have over 1200 buildings and how many acres of land and all those things you and the coordination between all the colleges and the other departments is it's really it's really quite remarkable. I mean, you you highlighted a few things, you know, just sitting down with our public safety team before a big Buckeye home game and looking at the level of coordination that they do not only just to the campus, but to all the other public safety agency that that it takes to put on a Buckeye game. You know, Columbus Police Department, Franklin County Sheriff's, the Ohio State Patrol, all the way to the federal to the FBI and Homeland Security. And I couldn't say enough about Monica and our chief, Jeffrey, and and the relationship. They built over the years. And because you think about it, we have 110,000 people congregating at a site. And probably more than that, we talk about tailgaters and others, you know, and our job is to keep all of them safe and just just was super impressed with all of that. And and not just game day, but I think our public safety teams, you know, they obviously really care the highest priority that keep our our students and our faculty and our staff safe. And and, you know, just all the things that they're thinking about each and every day to do that was was a really big highlight of my first two months. But as you said, I mean, I like I just love spending time with our our printing services team unit print. I got a great tour from Jeff, our director down there. And just to see the commitment and the quality to the quality that they do for our for our campus, not just printing services but people probably don't know. They do a lot of the signage that goes on campus. And and same thing with our transportation team. I was I was blown away when I met the leadership team at UTMB. Most of them, almost all of them I think had been with the department probably for 20, 25 plus years. Many of them had started as student bus drivers. I mean, and that's a consistent theme I'm seeing, particularly across the ANP at the longevity, the commitment of our people. And you don't see that everywhere. That's that's really a testament of the culture that that our leaderships have brought to it. But I think it's really the the love that people have for this institution, the love of being a Buckeye and and all those things. So long answer short is I am just incredibly impressed with the work that HP has been doing. So to spin that forward, right, because it is the operational work of the university, right? If there was a door to the university, we'd be keeping it open, right? That's what A&P does. How does that piece work then? Support the teaching research patient care that happens on campus? Some people don't always connect those. But from your view, are those connected? Absolutely. I mean, I, I don't know if this is a good analogy, but this is how I explained it to my wife and kids, kind of what we do. But, you know, if you if you think about the human body I really view as the cardiovascular system, we are the heartbeat. Of the institution. And if the arteries and veins get clogged up with cholesterol, you know, things are not going to start working as well as they can. So is if if the busses aren't running on time, that's going to have an impact to students and faculty and staff are the facilities are breaking down or we have water pipe leaks or the electricity doesn't run. Obviously, that's going to have an impact. Technology, it obviously we can't live without out that these days. So almost every department with an eye view, as you know, part of that cardiovascular system. And if we are having it run as effectively, efficiently we can, is absolutely going to have an impact on the ability or the efficiency that our faculty can do in the classroom Or are researchers what they can get accomplished in the in the lab? And then our are our nurses, then our doctors and our Wexner Medical Center team. The in the patient care that they're giving to not only Ohioans, but, you know, people from across the world. So it's kind of the the it's easy to forget, you know, it's kind of like your house, you know, nobody really realizes the electricity or the or the Wi-Fi until it goes out. And then, you know, as you're like my house, we all want the wi fi goes out. My kids, I don't know if they'd be able to survive or, you know, it is kind of a utility function, but it's so important to what we do each and every day. And so that's it's the lifeblood of this institution, in my opinion. The analogy I love to use for administration and planning is we are the offensive line, right? If we're doing our jobs, you probably never say our name, but once we're flagged for holding, we got problems. We're going in the wrong direction. Right. So and that Segways into my final question, which is about sports. So as we wrap up, I know you're a big sports fan. You've been a coach to your sons in baseball. You've also served as a basketball referee, which I think is interesting. So how did you get into the refereeing and how has that been a benefit to you in other areas? My family and I are we are we are big sports junkies. I wish I had a good story to tell you about basketball refereeing, but it really it was I was a poor college student and needed to make some money. And and I had a buddy who said, hey, we can go down to the YMCA and, you know, wrestle games all day Sunday and, you know, make, you know, make 50 bucks. And so I'm like, yeah, sure, sure, I'm in. But so that's how it started. But then I think of myself as an athlete. I'm sure I wasn't if you would go back and find any historical videos of that. But you know, I think why I love athletics so much is because by nature I'm just a competitive person. And, you know, I'm telling my kids, read this right now. I'm like, Someday it's going to end and you're going to have to fill that competitive void with something else. And so, you know, a lot of us fill it with golf or, you know, other activities as you kind of get out of out of the high school or college age. But when I stepped onto that basketball court, you know, it kind of brought back some of those competitive juices, you know, the feeling of it. And I just really kind of got hooked onto it and then kind of like my administrative career, I just was very fortunate to have a good group of older officials that mentored me and, you know, took me to Varsity Game. JV game. Varsity games eventually started to do college ball and it just kind of took off and it was just something, you know, I never even though I got started in it for the money, I never did it for the money. I would have done it for free because I just enjoyed being with the athletes, being being in that arena, hearing the crowds and those kind of things. But I have told people kind of it has been a really good training ground for being a university administrator. I mean, refereeing I don't care if it's a basketball game, football game, being a baseball umpire, whatever sport it might be, you know, it's really about just managing conflict. And 80, 85, 90% of the game kind of manages itself. You know, we all kind of know what the calls are. It's it's at 10% where, you know, judgment is needed. And I had a saying, you know, basketball refereeing was, you know, your job was to absorb chaos, create some calm and provide hope. And I think that translates nicely to what not only what university leadership does, but what what A&P does. You know, each and every day there's there's challenges. There's issues or problems we have to fix. And so our job is to just, you know, absorb that chaos, create some calm weather that whoever continue to. You as a group that might be that, you know, we'll get it fixed, we're going to get it figured out and that will get you back on your way as quickly we can. So give them some hope. So what kind of those? That philosophy. I've carried that officiating philosophy with me into my, you know, professional life and sometimes into my everyday private life as well. So. But the best part of being a college official is just the people you meet, the student athletes, the fellow officials, administrators at the school. I mean, that's really I could maybe describe to you one or two or three plays that I remember, but I, I can I can't tell you how many people I just become friends with over that. So it's been a great hobby, kind of taking a little bit of sabbatical this year given the move and the new job But after I get kind of settled here, hopefully I can find a game or two to go go referee here in central Ohio. Sounds good to me. I appreciate that insight. Appreciate your time. I know you're busy guy. Happy to come back anytime.

The City of Ohio State podcast is brought to you by the Office of Administration and Planning. Until next time, be kind and go Bucks.

[music]