

Ashanti Blaze Hopkins: Welcome to "Doing What Works: Exploring the Blue Economy," a podcast series that dives deep into the vast potential and challenges of the blue economy. I'm your host, Ashanti Blaze Hopkins, interim associate Dean at Santa Monica College's Center for Media and Design. Together, we'll navigate the uncharted waters of this exciting and rapidly growing sector. Joining us on the podcast today is someone who has quite the resume in the areas of international trade and economic development and is also one of the sharpest dressers I think I've ever met. He's worked in the administrations of both Mayors Eric Garcetti and Antonio Villaraigosa as Secretary General and Managing Director of International Trade and Foreign Affairs for the city of Los Angeles. He is now President and CEO of the Los Angeles Economic Development Corporation and the World Trade Center Los Angeles. And wait, there's more! He also serves on a number of boards throughout LA County. So, he's not busy at all. Stephen Cheung, thank you so much for joining us on the podcast today.

Stephen Cheung: Thank you for having me.

Ashanti Blaze Hopkins: Our first question for every one of our guests on the "Doing What Works" podcast is always the same: What was your first job ever and how did what you learn from that job help you do the work that you currently do today?

Stephen Cheung: I started actually when I was nine in a sweatshop here in Los Angeles County, in the Garment area. I learned that sometimes things don't always work out for folks that don't have access to Career Services and a future. But my first official job where I was paid was as a busboy at a Chinese restaurant. That also taught me that hard work is important, but you have to make a future for yourself. So, I have always taken that lesson with me and I have always wanted to make sure that wherever I go, I can roll up my sleeves and do what's necessary in order for me to make a better life for myself, but also a better life for our community. I always feel like when you start in the service industry, you learn so much about giving back, right? And listening and being empathetic and being able to serve. So, I'm not surprised at all that it surprises me zero when I think about the impact that you always have in the positions that you're in.

Ashanti Blaze Hopkins: So, why don't we start by talking a little bit about how you first learned about the blue economy and how it might impact Los Angeles and specifically the work that you do with the Los Angeles Economic Development Corporation?

Stephen Cheung: Well, when I was working at the city of Los Angeles, I got the opportunity to work at the Port of Los Angeles and started seeing the amazing opportunities available not only when it comes to trade and logistics, but also new technologies being formed. Back then, they were exploring new energy sources, including using algae as a way to produce fuel. So, it really stimulated my thinking in terms of what can happen. And in my current role at the World Trade Center as well as LAEDC, as we're looking at the future of Los Angeles' economy and what industries can potentially drive this entire region, the ocean economy then jumped out as such a promising new area that we should explore. And having the ocean next to us, I think we underutilize what the blue economy, the ocean economy, can do for this entire region.

Ashanti Blaze Hopkins: If you think about what's going to happen probably in the next 5, 10, 20 years with the blue economy and all the different jobs that we're likely to see come online, what is the LAEDC and the World Trade Center preparing to do to make sure that LA County is prepared for these blue economy jobs that are going to be coming online?

Stephen Cheung: I think we need to really think through how we corral all the things that are happening. The beauty and the challenge of the Los Angeles region is that we're a vast region. We have 88 different cities, over 100 incorporated regions. So, to make sure that the workforce development, the talent development, education side is connected with industry growth, it's connected with our supply chain, it's not an easy task like some other smaller regions. So, I think that's one of the major things that LAEDC is trying to tackle. How do we make sure that we understand where the direction of these industries is growing, what the needs are, so that we can start identifying how we can start capacitor our local community members, especially our future talent workforce, as well as small businesses to take advantage of the growth of these opportunities? So that when these industries are growing, especially the blue economy, that the jobs are available to sometimes our most disinvested communities that might not even know that there's an option for them in this field.

Ashanti Blaze Hopkins: I want to kind of talk a little bit about what you mentioned about the importance of partnerships, collaborations in this kind of work. How important will it be for LA County and Southern California to build coalitions in order to meet the moment that we find ourselves in as it relates to the blue economy?

Stephen Cheung: It's vital for the collaboration and the coordination to happen. Otherwise, you're going to have disjointed programs and folks can go into a program thinking they're going to learn about certain traits, but when they're out of that program, they realize that the skill set is no longer relevant because our technology is evolving so quickly and the needs of the industry are evolving so quickly. And same thing with industry as well as you're preparing to move forward. If they're not connected with, for example, the government structure, they're not going to know the upcoming policies that would guide where they're going to go or limit where they can go. So, having a comprehensive strategy, you can't develop it by yourself. And that's why these collaborations and partnerships are necessary. What LAEDC hopes to do is that we want to bring the partners together so collectively there's a structure in place for them to share these ideas. But collectively as a region, we should have an economic blueprint, a step-by-step instruction of knowing who's doing what when, where. So that at any given point, there's no confusion and you can coordinate and you can plug into the system very easily, whether you're just coming into the blue economy or you have been a leading expert because everybody's always learning about this very exciting change that's happening with our industry.

Ashanti Blaze Hopkins: For our listeners out there that may not be really aware of how blue the economy is going to impact this particular region, how many jobs are we talking about here? How many different types of areas of industry is this going to touch?

Stephen Cheung: It depends on how you look at the industry. For us, it's basically the blue economy that touches anything that has to do with access to the ocean. So, from the trade and logistics sector, the Port of Los Angeles, Port of Long Beach, being the number one and number two container ports in North America, controlling over 43% of all cargo coming into the United States. So, if one region is controlling that much and we've seen what happened during COVID, people are buying things and it's all coming from Asia, the manufacturers there into this region. Those are hundreds of thousands of jobs, anywhere from 800,000 jobs in the Southern California region alone are directly impacted by these two port operations. Nationally, you're talking about over three million jobs in this area. That's just an estimate. Then you can talk about other things that are not related directly to trade and logistics. As we're looking into the future, we're going to need more underwater robotic technology, aquaculture. Can you imagine if we're able to grow some of the aquaculture products like seafood and different products that can be utilized here locally? So, instead of shipping from our international partners, we can basically decrease the carbon footprints of those manufacturing and the supply chain issues. So, you're going to have a lot of different potentials from food production, from trade and logistics, but also from a research perspective. Once you have these products, you can imagine you also need to market this from a communication standpoint, from a media standpoint. So, all these are jobs. So, it's hard for us to quantify, but in my estimate nationally, we're talking about millions of jobs that will be created by just this one industry.

Ashanti Blaze Hopkins: It feels like such an exciting time to be in an area like LA County, to be in Southern California. Especially even at Santa Monica College where we have our first certificate in aquaculture coming on board in the fall. So, you know, we already are seeing how at the community college level, we're trying to prepare that next generation of workforce for these amazing jobs and so many that are going to be coming online quite soon. Tell me this, why is the work that you're doing with LAEDC and the World Trade Center so important when we think about the blue economy? And can we afford any missteps here? Do we have to make sure we get this right and get it right the first time?

Stephen Cheung: We have to get it right, right away. Yes, there's some leeway, not too many mistakes, maybe some missteps, but mistakes are going to be costly. The reason is that we're not the only ones looking at this economy. There are other regions across the world where up and down the coast of California, going up to Seattle, you have other cities that would vie for this really competitive market. And they're investing heavily into making sure that they have the ecosystem. And that's why not only for LAEDC and World Trade Center, but I'm so glad that Santa Monica College is able to get ahead of the game and start providing these opportunities and these education services to make sure that our workforce right now is prepared. Because the more prepared we are and the more talent we have here, the easier it is for us to attract new companies that want to be here. The companies that are coming here are not only looking for opportunities, but they're looking for the talent development system. They can't grow without talent. And that's why this is a key marriage that needs to happen between the two. So, back to your question in terms of how much leeway, how much flexibility, we don't want to make too many errors. What we need to do right now is make sure that LA's work is about this coordination, getting the information ready so that we have this comprehensive playbook, this

blueprint. And when the blueprint is in place, then it's a lot easier for us to not have any missteps. That way, we're not seeding the leadership of creating this industry and driving this industry to other regions. That once they get the lead, all the companies will go there and their jobs will go there too. So, let's not lose this opportunity for this region.

Ashanti Blaze Hopkins: When you talk about this blueprint and kind of creating a path forward, it makes me think about some of the work that's being done in the region with community colleges with the blue economy and Climate Action Pathways project. LAEDC is very intimately involved in that to make sure that we are able to not only upskill the workforce, but also upskill the educators who will be helping to train the workforce. Can you talk a little bit about how the value add of having LAEDC and the World Trade Center involved in that particular project, how is that really going to push the needle forward in this area?

Stephen Cheung: As you're looking at the development of these industries, the potential that I've been talking about, the industry evolution and their needs, and we've been talking about the students and the learners, but in order for that to happen, you have to have educators. And if the educators are not aware of the changes that are happening, then they won't be able to pass on the knowledge and train this entire class of talent. So, that's why the work that we do, part of what we do is to make sure that there is engagement process between our employers so that the educators are understanding the changes and they can then develop the curriculum and the skill sets that are necessary to change and evolve and give them the edge necessary. Again, this is a competitive market. And so, in order for us to have this comprehensive approach to developing an entire system, we need the community colleges as a whole. And so, LAEDC has been working very closely with individual community colleges but also the Los Angeles Regional Consortium as a whole. And we're so thankful that we have such great support and partners with all the educators are excited about learning about how to get us ready for the future of what LA could be. Otherwise, if we're just sitting here waiting for things to happen, you're not driving the economy. You're just waiting for the economy to happen. So, this is a collective effort for us to really shape the future of what we can be as a region.

Ashanti Blaze Hopkins: You mentioned what LA could be. So, I want to ask you, what is that dream state for the blue economy for you, especially for LA County? If you had a magic wand and you could just say, "Boop, here we go," what would that look like?

Stephen Cheung: I would like to see in the future when people think of Los Angeles from the international market, from other states, they don't only think of Hollywood. They think of Hollywood and, "Oh my God, did you hear about the blue economy that's happening there? Did you see the underwater robotics program that they've created and how they've shaped how we're able to transport goods all around the world because of what they did with this system?" And it's because the talent development system is so robust that all these companies are flooding there. The way that they talked about Silicon Valley back in the '90s, I want them to look at Los Angeles and immediately say, "Blue economy is the way to go." That's my dream. And have a magic wand and we're getting there, but we just need to expedite that process and that magic wand to speed it up.

Ashanti Blaze Hopkins: What do you think the biggest hurdles are going to be to getting to that dream state?

Stephen Cheung: It's the coordination. That's why we're taking this on because it's not an easy task. But someone has to do it. We have 10 million people here in Los Angeles County and hurting cats is difficult. But hurting cats that live in such a large region with so many different needs and so many different focus areas and we're distracted all the time because we're LA. One day, Taylor Swift is here, the next day Beyonce is here. How do you get them to focus on the ocean economy when you're competing against the Rams and the Chargers and all these folks playing right? So, all these great opportunities, right? Here. So, getting folks to focus and looking at it as a way to invest in the future, that's going to be the challenging part. And getting consensus because you're going to have a lot of different ideas. We just mentioned the vast opportunities that are available through the ocean economy. What is the priority? Is it trade and logistics? Is it aquaculture? Is it underwater robotics? What is it? So, those are the things that we need to work through and it's not going to be easy. But we need to do it now so that we're not, again, behind when other folks are actually really putting together this strategy in their own region as well.

Ashanti Blaze Hopkins: I think what's exciting too is that there's so much funding that is going to be infused and has already been infused into this region, into our state, both from the state level and the federal level. Can you talk a little bit about how that's going to help kind of jump-start what we need to do to prepare for what's coming?

Stephen Cheung: Those funding that's available from the federal level includes the Infrastructure Reduction Act, the Infrastructure Investment Job Act, and a number of different programs that are going to be funneling billions of dollars into states and local jurisdictions. And when that money is available, they really want to invest in the future of work, the future of the economy. And so, this gets the opportunity to take that funding and to be able to create these systems. But really start investing into the industries that we think are going to be the best bet for us. But again, another issue for LA is we have so many different industries. You look at some of the other regions, maybe they have one or two industries they can focus on. So, it's easy for them to decide, "Okay, it's oil and gas," or, "It's technology." Here, is it aerospace and defense? Is it the ocean economy? Is it sports entertainment? Is it Hollywood? Is it digital media entertainment? It's all of the above. So, once the dollar comes in, then basically sometimes it becomes a competitive factor. How do we then basically convince everybody that the blue economy is an engine and growing sector that is worth investment? Because the outcome down the line is going to be so productive and so valuable. So, I think that's going to be a key aspect of what we need to do to make sure that the coordination of this is there so we can then tell the story. And that's why, again, Santa Monica College through your program and through your focus is allowing us to really tell that message. Not only for the areas around the college, but really for the entire region to basically get a better understanding. Because if you don't tell the story, other people will basically consume the oxygen in the room. And it's going to go back to Taylor Swift or Beyonce again.

Ashanti Blaze Hopkins: Which, you know, I get it. Taylor Swift and Beyonce are kind of fantastic. But yes, we have to focus. So, let's talk about what is working right now in LA County in terms of growing the blue economy. And then if you think about that part of it, what can other regions learn from what we're doing here in terms of what's working?

Stephen Cheung: What's working is now we've seen a willingness for community colleges and education academic partners to come together with industry partners. And this is not just large companies. Small companies are growing as well. Everybody's interested in figuring out what is the next step. So, there is a cohesive strategy that is not easy to do. A lot of other regions are going to be struggling with the same thing because one of the things that we mentioned is fighting for that mind space, right? But in Los Angeles, we're now able to really focus on the opportunities. So, people are seeing the value. So, more and more, so when people are talking about the blue economy, people understand. So, we don't have to convince them the same way that we did maybe five years ago. We have to basically explain what that is as a whole. So, I think that's where the opportunity is going to be and that's where the future is going to be. And if we get this right, I think that other regions can take this and replicate this process. It doesn't have to be the ocean economy or the blue economy. It can be a many other economies. This structure is there and we keep on going back to that. That's such an important thing to do. And if LA can do it with our 10 million people, other smaller regions might be able to do the same thing a lot easier and they don't have to go through the same mistakes or the same timeline. They can scale in a much faster way.

Ashanti Blaze Hopkins: We get this right, it benefits not just our state, our region, it benefits really globally. And already, a lot of folks are looking at us globally. So, this is nothing new. LA has always been the leader in many different ways. You see international delegations coming to Los Angeles all the time. In fact, just in the last few months, we've hosted delegations from Singapore, Vietnam, the Netherlands, and Germany. They're all here trying to basically figure out how we move forward so quickly with our sustainability industries. And that didn't come naturally 20 years ago. We built that. And now we're replicating that process and learning quite a little bit from it and now doing the same thing with the blue economy, right? So, the world is already looking towards us. And if we get this right, the world will continue to look for us. And by the way, this is not just sharing knowledge. This is a sharing opportunity for our companies because our companies are here and our workers are here. They get to export their products and their services and their knowledge internationally. So, for the students that are going through these programs, your skill sets are now going to be applicable if you want to go to Tokyo, they want you. If you want to go to Paris, they want you. You can go around the world, anywhere you want.

Ashanti Blaze Hopkins: It feels like we are already doing what works.

Stephen Cheung: We are. But you know, I think just because we're heading in the right direction, the final product, the completed product, we're not there yet. And while, yes, we're doing a lot of things that are working, but it's just such a massive challenge to get the product

right. It's about the outcome, not just the output. So, how do we get to the final product? And that's what we're focused on.

Ashanti Blaze Hopkins: Stephen Cheungong, thank you so much for sharing your insights and expertise with us.

Stephen Cheungong: Thank you.

Ashanti Blaze Hopkins: Also to all of you joining us for this incredible journey through the blue economy, we hope you'll stay connected and keep listening. Until next time, remember, the blue economy isn't just about what's underwater. It's about uplifting communities and creating opportunities for generations to come. I'm Ashanti Blaze Hopkins. Thanks for listening.

[End of Episode]