



Posted on Sun, Sep. 04, 2011

A conversation with Chris Huffman

BY CARRIE RENGERS
The Wichita Eagle

Chris Huffman is a one-of-a-kind guy — literally.

Huffman, who works out of Lawrence, is a licensed professional engineer, a certified appraiser, an approved mediator and a certified instructor for the National Highway Institute.

"As far as I know, I'm the only (one) of my kind in the country," he said.

He is partners with Steve Martens in Huffman Corridor Consulting, which is part of Wichita-based Martens Cos.

Huffman specializes in balancing land use and transportation.

The droll Huffman likes to crack jokes about his job — and seemingly everything else.

"With this kind of work, if you didn't laugh, you'd sob uncontrollably," he said. "It's just very high-pressure work. It's not very popular right now. If you're doing anything, including nothing, you're probably irritating somebody."

Who are your clients?

"Typically, my clients can be either public sector — federal, state or local — that are interested in preserving the integrity, the functionality, of the transportation corridor so it does a better job of sustaining economic development, or it can be private sector. For instance, somebody who needs a traffic-impact study for a development they're proposing."

What's a typical day for you?

"There's no such thing. You have to just be willing to morph to what the demands of the day are going to be. Land use-transportation interactions are very dynamic. They'll change with the personalities involved."

How did you get into the business?

"I spent 15 years with the Kansas Department of Transportation. For 12 of those 15 years, I got to be involved in the development of, and was the first administrator for, what they called their Corridor Management Program."

What interests you about this work with developers and designing thoroughfares and access to them?

"That it puts me into absolutely everything. I get involved in some of the trickiest and most complex engineering situations. Some of the most nuanced and subtle land value situations.

"Legal issues. I spend a fair amount of time working with attorneys, either as a litigation consultant or as an expert witness.

"I am a Kansas Supreme Court civil mediator. ... So public policy dispute resolution is one of the things that I do."

How hard is your job?

"Well, if it was easy, anybody could do it."

Is it fun?

"Very. It's interesting. It's challenging. Yeah, I do enjoy it very much."

How did you come to partner with Steve Martens?

"I became interested in real property when I was still with KDOT ... and became keenly aware that we were hitting two distinct classes of problems.

"The first class of problem was where public policies in the eyes of the property owners were disrupting the economic value of their property, and we had no way to answer that ... challenge.

"So I undertook training to become an appraiser. But part of becoming certified involves experience under a certified appraiser. I was lucky enough to train under the Martens Companies."

Your work takes you around the country?

"This summer I even traveled internationally (to) Athens, Greece. I was invited with a couple of colleagues of mine to conduct a daylong workshop at the first ever International Access Management Conference."

So in this industry, you're a big deal?

"Thank you."

You also helped in Wichita with the Kellogg expansion, right?

"We just finished up the planning study for the Kellogg expansion into and through Andover, and I was involved pretty heavily with a lot of advance ... right-of-way acquisition."

"My involvement in the Kellogg corridor goes back several years to when I was still at KDOT."

So we have you to blame?

"Sure."

Seriously, when — or is — Kellogg ever going to be finished?

"Kellogg will be finished. The problem is the amount of money it takes to fix the problem ... cannot keep pace with the rate of expansion."

"That's part of the reason why I do what I do. That shouldn't be the case."

"A well-planned and well-managed corridor can be expanded without victimizing the ... economic system, the developments, that are dependent upon it. But that's not typically the way it happens."

How do you avoid that?

"You try to limit the number of conflict points. ... You try to separate conflict areas. ... And you try to remove turning traffic from through lanes."

"One of the major problems with the Kellogg expansion was there were two-way frontage roads on either side of old Kellogg that were far too close to operate properly, and then the developments that anchored themselves to those frontage roads then were horribly disrupted by the Kellogg expansion."

How do you help?

"One: retrofit. We have a major meltdown mess, how do we fix it?"

"Two: How do we prevent the same things from happening over and over and over again?"

Can the Kellogg situation be solved?

"There are any number of solutions. It's just the price you're going to have to pay may not be something you're willing to bear."

Do you think about traffic situations all the time?

"Yes, I am that obsessed."

What keeps you up at night?

"That we're never going to learn. See, right now, the biggest problem is good access. Good corridor management is viewed as being anti-recovery. We cannot grow our economy if we have all these cumbersome burdens and regulations."

"There is a tragic assumption that we can either have a safe, well-managed and efficient transportation system or we can have economic development and strong growth, but we cannot have both at the same time."

To which you would say?

"Nothing could possibly be further from the truth."

So what kind of driver are you?

"I'm an excellent driver. I tend to drive more slowly because I tend to notice and pay more attention to things that are either good or not good about what I see."

So you're that guy I've been honking at to get out of the way?

"Very likely, yes."

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