

Environmental Policy Questions Answered with Mandy Mahoney | Transcript

Speaker 1 ([00:02](#)):

[inaudible].

Announcer ([00:02](#)):

Welcome to green building matters, the podcast that matters for green building professionals. Learn inside in green buildings as we interview today's experts and lead and well we'll learn from their career paths, war stories and all things green because green building matters and now our host and yes he has every lead ed well credential. Here's Charlie Cichetti.

Announcer ([00:33](#)):

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Charlie ([01:01](#)):

Welcome to the next episode of the green building matters podcast. I'm your host Charlie Cichetti and today we've got an Atlanta sustainability professional. I have wanted to have Mandy on for a while now and we've got it nailed down, but Mandy Mahoney's joining us. We're going to talk a lot about sustainability in the Southeast and in and around Atlanta. Mandy, thanks for joining us today.

Mandy ([01:19](#)):

Thank you Charlie. I'm glad to be here.

Charlie ([01:20](#)):

And you know, I can't wait to unpack a little bit about some of your advanced degrees, even your law degree and how'd you get into policy and a little bit of your time with the city of Atlanta. Of course on the sustainability front, but I was like to ask, Hey, where'd you grow up? Where'd you go to school?

Mandy ([01:35](#)):

Well I am a Macon Nite. I grew up in Macon, Georgia and Macon as an hour away from Atlanta and a world away. It is definitely the South and that serves me well in the work. It services 11 States, Virginia to Arkansas to Florida and it's fun living here in the big city of Atlanta. But I'm also very thankful that I grew up in the deep South to have the insights of what it was like to be there.

Charlie ([02:02](#)):

Absolutely. And then stuck around, for college. Tell us a little bit about those days and some of your degrees.

Mandy ([02:08](#)):

I went to Emory for undergraduate and double majored in biology and I was the first bachelor's of science graduate in the environmental studies degree program and I was very proud of that and I got to

focus on ecology at Emory and that exposed me to a wonderful way to see the world. I was taught how to read ecosystems through learning about, you know, the native ecosystem.

Charlie ([02:38](#)):

So you know, growing up here in Atlanta, and I've been in Georgia most of my life. I know you had Macon, you chose to go to Emory undergrad and then we can talk to. But tell me about just again being, being outside of Atlanta and then coming to Atlanta and Emory for school.

Mandy ([02:53](#)):

I grew up in Macon. I went to Catholic school and what's so interesting about many of the Catholic schools in the deep South is that they were established before integration and they were some of the first schools that were integrated. And the schools I went to in Macon, I was taught by nuns, the sisters of mercy and Macon waited to desegregate their schools until 1974 the last day by federal law, but the Catholic schools in town had been integrated for much longer since before that. And that was a conscious choice by the Catholic church. And that showed up very early in my education. I can remember clearly second grade sister Bernadette teaching us about social justice and was a theme throughout my education as an elementary child. And as I got into middle school and in high school and I thought about true social justice, what built my philosophy that I still lived by now is that everyone deserves access to clean air, clean water, arable land. And that is what shaped my career even today. And that is what took me into majoring in environmental studies in addition, biology at Emory, and then pursuing a degree in law and environmental management at Duke.

Charlie ([04:24](#)):

That's amazing. I know you're right. I think we think of more common civil rights but not that access that sometimes we even take for granted here in the United States versus some third world countries. So I can't wait to hear more about that. But you know, would you say maybe that was a moment there and that's why you knew you wanted to get that master's on the environmental side and back it up with some laws. So to tell us how that continued.

Mandy ([04:45](#)):

So when I was in ninth grade, I started working with sea turtles on the Georgia coast on Lassa islands where it's a project that still goes on today. The Caretta Research Project is the oldest tagging project in the U S and it was amazing that as a high schooler, I could go and volunteer on Caretta with actual scientists and get to learn all the things that go into field research and go into sea turtle conservation. And I thought that I would probably do that for my career until I was working on Jekyll Island during college. In one day, 32 dead sea turtles washed up on the beach and under federal law, under the endangered species act, you have to do an autopsy on endangered species that wash up on the beach. And what that means is you have to open up that 500 pound dead sea turtle and dig through its insides to find what killed it.

Mandy ([05:44](#)):

Well, the only reason a sea turtle washes up on the beach is because it has decay on the inside. So it's a 500 pound balloon of the time it gets to the beach. And you can only imagine how bad that sounds. And so yes, that one day we got to dissect 26 sea turtles. We found nothing inside of them because all of them drown from being caught in nets that were not properly fitted with turtle excluder devices. And these were Asian shrimping boats that would come in under the cover of darkness and shrimp. And

because we do not have sufficient resources to support the Georgia department of environmental protection to patrol, enforce the laws effectively, it was just one day that this amount of damage could be done. And unfortunately there were a few weeks where all along the Georgia coast there were these incredible straining events that happened and what that taught me was that the laws just are not good enough. And that was the moment that I decided I'm going to go back to law school and get a law degree

Charlie (06:55):

That was going to be your career path. I love how you've connected those dots there Mandy did anyone else have any influence there. Did you have any mentors you looked up to or some work you followed, anyone opened some doors for you there so far?

Mandy (07:08):

I was so fortunate that all throughout my life that I had mentors that were willing to give me an opportunity to learn by being in the field with them and the opportunity to get to do real scientific field work from such an early age gave me confidence in my abilities, sparked a lot of curiosity. I learned how to just really be myself and find my confidence and find my voice. And so Chris Williams, who, who still runs the Credit Research project today has always been a friend and mentor. Eloise Carter was, one of my major professors in botany as an undergrad, as well as John Wagner at Emory. And all of them were just always kind and supportive and willing to spend the time to talk with me and further my own curiosity. And I think that that's what I've tried to do now for the young people that I mentor. It's not about what I've learned. It's more about helping them think about how to explore their hopes and dreams and make a difference in the world.

Charlie (08:14):

I love it. That's so great and we will connect a few dots there. So tell us about, you know, some of the career path and maybe some of the work you've done with the city of Atlanta. And then of course I want to do a deeper dive on all the work you've been doing there for the last nine or 10 years with SEEA and also more about that career journey.

Mandy (08:30):

I'm probably one of the only people you will ever meet that has gone to three law schools. After finishing at Emory, the environmental studies textbooks literally had Atlanta bad Portland good when you would read about city planning. And so I decided that I needed to ship myself to Portland and learn about why it was so great cause I liked Atlanta and so I started at the most liberal law school in nation Lewis and Clark knowing I would do my masters in environmental management at Duke after my first year I went to Duke and then it was really amazing the synergies of doing the joint degree there. So I transferred was at Duke law school and it was Duke when I was doing both degrees that I got very interested in clean energy and climate change policy. I had not been exposed to that.

Mandy (09:21):

And undergrad it just wasn't part of the curriculum. And I realized that the, if you look at the, the real pain points driving the world today, it revolves around how we consume resource produce electricity and to make things move and that is what drives greenhouse gases. And so I got so excited about that opportunity and learning and meeting people in the field. And I also figured out I did not want to practice law and I was going to have a lot of student loan debt and I needed to do something about that.

So I got a wonderful job opportunity here in Atlanta to work for a gentleman who had just sold his business and the real estate field gentleman named Ray Weeks. And he was discerning what he wanted to do professionally as well as with his family's philanthropic dollars. And so I worked as his researcher and at that point, Mayor Shirley Franklin was the mayor here in Atlanta and she had a very good track record of starting major projects with the help of business and academic government.

Mandy ([10:28](#)):

And one of those projects is what we now love here in Atlanta called the Atlanta BeltLine. She tapped Ray to be businessperson leading that. And so I had the opportunity to be a part of that project the very earliest days. And I decided that it made much more sense for me to transfer to Emory to finish my law degree because I can tell that that opportunity to work on the BeltLine was a once in a lifetime project. And so I went to law school full time to finish my JD as well as worked full time. And it is certainly one of the best things I've ever done. I learned so much and I met my husband through the project, which is wonderful for that. And I got to know a lot of people in the administration and that is what allowed me, when Mayor Franklin decided she wanted to address sustainability as one of her final projects, that I was fortunate to be tapped as the first director of sustainability for the city of Atlanta.

Charlie ([11:26](#)):

Wow. And for those that are listening that haven't been through Atlanta yet. The BeltLine's one of the best projects we have around our city and just the green space and the stimulus development around it all. So glad that you've had a hand in that. And we're early in sustainability in the city of Atlanta and that's a good question I wanted to follow up with is what are some other accomplishments. Maybe if you look back on the highlight reel, you know, what else has stood out and what are you really proud of?

Mandy ([11:50](#)):

I have been fortunate to find, to be risk seeking and in terms of finding new opportunities to address sustainability. And because this field is very young still, and so I'm thankful to be at the early edge of a lot of the developments. And when I look at what we created in the first phase of sustainability at the city of Atlanta, I look at how we put in place the first telework programs. And that mattered to me so much because when we did a map of how our city employees were commuting in, there were a significant number of people who were commuting well over an hour. And that's just silly. You waste so much of your productive life by commuting. And it's also a safety concern. Like when I was in the city, there was a different threat of virus, but there was a need to be able to ensure people could telework to keep the city operations going.

Mandy ([12:56](#)):

And I think about that, with the coronavirus facing us now, not only do we need to be able to telework so that we can reduce the amount of greenhouse gas emissions and improve people's quality of life, but also just so that we can keep our basic functions going and in terms of the city's building footprint. And that was the first time we did the city's carbon footprint. It was the first time that we got a very clean list of what buildings the city owned, what buildings the city did not own and map all of the electricity and gas accounts so that we could get a handle on what the city was using. Therefore, what the carbon emissions were. Therefore, where there were opportunities for savings and getting that data we were able to empower departments to, for the first time ever understand their budgets, understand these cost centers. And I found as people really did want to address climate change even 10 years ago, it was

the topic but they didn't have the information to make decisions. And so being able to provide people with basic tools was very rewarding.

Charlie ([14:05](#)):

That's amazing. That's definitely on the highlight reel. Thank you for sharing that. Let's talk a little bit about today. What's keeping you busy? What kind of fun projects are you working on it? And tell us more about SEEA.

Mandy ([14:16](#)):

SEEA, the Southeast Energy Efficiency Alliance is a 501C3 nonprofit based in Atlanta. And we serve 11 States, Virginia to Arkansas, to Florida. And our core is in our name. We've worked on energy efficiency policy and it doesn't stop there. We also do a tremendous amount on electric transportation policy and we look at the intersection of energy efficiency and electric transportation as it addresses climate change, resilience and health impacts. We work hard on focusing on supporting those are the lower end side of the economic spectrum because that is an area, if you just think about it from the building stock in the South, we have a lot of old buildings, we have a lot of buildings that were built before any sort of code and so they are not the best buildings to live in or to occupy if you're as a business and we want to work on supporting the upgrade of existing infrastructure so that we can have a better and more resilient economic base in the South and a healthier population.

Charlie ([15:25](#)):

Yeah, and you know those States, I mean how, I'm just curious, how were those identified? I mean, are there, you know, other groups that are handling other States? I mean, how was all this divided up? Kind of what does that come down from?

Mandy ([15:36](#)):

Yeah. SEEA is a regional energy efficiency organization and we do have sister organizations throughout the country and the South, our footprint was determined in 2005 by a coalition of groups ranging from South Face, The Department of Energy, the American Council for an Energy Efficient Economy who came together and recognize that the energy efficiency organizations and the other parts of the country served those regions well and that the South would be served well by having one. And they defined the South as Virginia to Arkansas, to Florida.

Charlie ([16:11](#)):

Got it. That's funny.

Mandy ([16:13](#)):

Yeah. There's another group that serves Texas and Oklahoma It's oftentimes people will,

Charlie ([16:18](#)):

think that's in the South. Yeah,

Mandy ([16:19](#)):

Texas. And it was just not a part of our original document or founding documents.

Charlie ([16:24](#)):

Let me ask about EV Uh, I'm a fan of electric vehicles. I had a Chevy Volt for a couple of years. Georgia had some great incentives and I've had a Nissan Leaf for about five and a half years. So is it true, Mandy, that Atlanta is still one of the leading cities for the number of electric vehicles on the road? You know, maybe San Francisco is still ahead of us. I mean how are we doing with electric vehicles here in Atlanta and maybe the Southeast

Mandy ([16:46](#)):

The city of Atlanta, Metro Atlanta is not where we were when we had the tax credits. As context for the listeners, Georgia had a very rich incentive for electric vehicles, passenger vehicles and that led Atlanta to be the number one obesity for a number of years. But then the governor assault billand that was hit to the tax base and eliminated it. And after that we saw participle dropoff in the amount of EVs that has begun to change. Again, Atlanta is still high on the list of cities, but there are other cities that have more than we do in the region. Miami is the number one city in terms of electric vehicle penetration. Miami, interestingly enough, is number three in the country for quantity of electric vehicles just New York and LA

Charlie ([17:46](#)):

I didn't know that. That's fantastic. You know, a lot of our listeners here are architects, engineers, contractors, a lot of new construction lead projects, some property managers for example on the existing building side. But some of the policy you and your team work on, where are they going to see that? I mean, is that what's getting adopted by their towns and their cities? I mean, you know, where are we seeing some of your work? What does it impact our buildings the most?

Mandy ([18:10](#)):

Building energy codes is a core focus of SEEA's work and we believe that it's essential to adopt the most recent energy code and also properly educate the stakeholders, the building officials so that it's effectively implemented. And so we work on both the adoption as well as the implementation and the compliance of building codes. One thing we're very proud of is in Florida for instance, we have a circuit writer who goes around and trains the local government officials on the Florida building code. And she's a resource available, not just for that one training, but they can call her up, they can talk to her about it. And we have found that it is absolutely an essential resource to ensure that the local officials know what they are to department or not. We would like to see that in more States and in more jurisdictions because we often hear complaints about permitting processes active. And I know that's a real thorn in the side of the building community. We would also like to see the South be able to go beyond the base level energy code. We're very excited about zero energy codes and in the most recent adopted ICC code, we don't believe that's going to be adopted by communities in States in the South soon. But we would like to see it be adopted because we think it's important to highlight that we saw this state and our region that does not have a building code.

Charlie ([19:47](#)):

That's good. I interviewed people from other countries around the globe on the podcast, but I didn't realize that here. I guess you're uncovering some things that I would have thought that was the case.

Mandy ([19:59](#)):

There is still a chunk of States and the one in the South is Mississippi. So Mississippi does not have a building energy code statewide. They have some storm codes from the South that were courtesy Katrina. You really see it in LA, the quality of construction in that state. Unfortunately.

Charlie ([20:17](#)):

I had Dan Burgoyne on with the state of California policy on and you know, California obviously a leader lining up for 20, 30 and more net zero buildings. But you know, that's kind of part of my next question to you, especially as a policy maker. If you had a crystal ball, Mandy, what, where do you think this green building movement is shifting? I mean, you know, you could talk a little more about anything on your mind, but especially with net zero, is it on in the state of Georgia right now? You know, I've got a lot of developers. They'd probably think it's farfetched to think we're going to be required to have some net zero buildings in the next 10 years. But I mean, we're going to have to, right.

Mandy ([20:49](#)):

I hope we will. I don't know though. I think for Georgia you are, I don't know if I share your optimism that we'll see a zero energy code. I do know that there are a lot of voluntary efforts going on in Georgia because you have leading builders here in leading architects and those people are critical to setting the foundation so that policy makers have the political cover and the courage to adopt the leading edge policy.

Charlie ([21:19](#)):

That's a good word. Courage. Yeah, you're right. Well, let's talk. What else though do you think is coming? What should me and the listeners here on the green building management podcast, what should we be reading up on? What else?

Mandy ([21:30](#)):

We think that there are a couple areas that are evolving. One, you can't ignore how the conversation around resilience has found its legs in the South and we, if you look at language choices by policy makers currently, for instance, Florida, but there's still a substantial amount of building going on. We've been tracking the resilience bills going through the legislature, the cycle there. And we have a Republican governor, Republican leadership in the legislature. And for the first time in Florida, you have a chief resiliency officer appointed by this governor and there are significant resilience bills that will get adopted. And when you look at how, what they're talking about, it's really a language around storm hardening and being able to survive storms. And so I would say that that is something for your listeners to watch out for in Florida and our other States like North Carolina and Virginia where this is also a hot topic, those States, because your democratic leadership there, they have a more balanced approach around looking in addition to hardening, but also looking at adaptation. I think that I would just caution listeners to understand the state context, if they're trying to work with the policy arena around buildings in the face of resilience.

Charlie ([22:58](#)):

In Atlanta, the mayor's offices, even changed the name to the office of resiliency. So that's just another entity.

Mandy ([23:05](#)):

Yes. I love that too. I would like for all of the sustainability offices. When you think about sustainability, do you really want to just stay in your life or do you want to be resilient?

Charlie ([23:18](#)):

That's a pretty powerful word. And you know there's nothing greener than reusing buildings and buildings that last a lot longer or et cetera. Preparedness. This is a great conversation and you know, because when I talk to someone maybe getting out of college and ,let them know about the real estate movement and green buildings, maybe even renewables. But I don't talk a lot about policy. That's why I'm really excited to have you on here. And I just want to ask you a few more questions. Mandy, for one is, you know, what's your specialty or gift, what you think you're really good at.

Mandy ([23:46](#)):

I enjoy bringing people together who have supposedly different points of view and finding the magic and where there is alignment and win-win solutions. Cause I find in the policy landscape when we have something that does feel win-win, it's more durable, it's easy to get a win that we can celebrate and it's be short lived because it becomes a target for the other side. The next cycle is a lot harder to think about the long game and to strike a deal that is durable and here in Georgia I think that the solar community has done a masterful job in our state and they would tell you they still have a long way to go but if you look at the gains they've made over the last 10 years, they've been durable gains that have lasted and been able to be built on.

Charlie ([24:39](#)):

That's a, it is a gift. And now when you're bringing people together, do you have any pro tips on, do you try and get everybody to be able to speak up and how do you really extract some different opinions and have some true collaboration? Any tips there to make sure everybody feels included?

Mandy ([24:52](#)):

A lot of pre-work a lot of the elegance in the meeting is generated by all of the work that is done in advance. It's like hosting a dinner party. You want to make sure that people know what to wear, know that their food preferences are going to be honored, that they are going to get to sit next to somebody that they enjoy, that it's going to be a fun environment. Public policy is no different. People want to be in a community where they feel heard, where they feel supported, so that just means you got to spend a lot of time with them one on one in advance. Understanding what their needs and desires and their hopes and dreams are so that they feel well supported coming into whatever the meeting or the conversation is.

Charlie ([25:40](#)):

Awesome. Amazing analogy. I thank you. That was really good. Do you have any routines or rituals mainly that help you stay on point, help you stay successful? Any additional pro tips there?

Mandy ([25:52](#)):

I am very thankful for my meditation routine. I start my day with meditation. It ranges in what kind of meditation. This morning I did the body scan meditation that allows me to feel grounded in whatever energy is going on that day and then be able to unpack my feeling anxiety. Am I feeling excitement? Am I feeling sick, I'm like, what's going on? And then I'm able to be more aware and more present from a day. Another form of meditation I really enjoy as a Buddhist practice of Metta meditation, loving kindness

meditation. And that allows me to think about and set intentions for my loved ones, but also create a space to be present to people that I might not be able to be in a constructive relationship with and find benevolence or people who I may not see eye to eye with so that I can figure out ways to effectively work with them.

Charlie ([26:51](#)):

A lot of wisdom and that was a fantastic thank you. Let's talk a little bit about bucket list. I'm a big fan, actually, maybe of a bucket list of a lot of cool things on there. And so I'm just curious, is there one or two things you could share that might be on your bucket list?

Mandy ([27:07](#)):

Yes, and this will show you how much of an climate and energy geek I am they go back to the work we do here at SEEA, I would really like to see that electric transportation is an assumed consideration in all new buildings so that it is not something you have to go back in and engineer for a lot of money when you decide that you want to provide EV charging at your business or to have EV charging at your house and I know the new ICC code considers that and we have a EV ready ordinance here in Atlanta. I would like to see that just be a universal thing. And then secondly, energy burden is not something we've talked about much yet today, but energy burden and core concept is the quantity of your monthly income that goes towards paying your energy bills and your light bulb.

Mandy ([28:00](#)):

And it's considered 3% as a sustainable amount for a family. And the Southeast has a disproportionately high energy burden if disproportionately high energy bills and some of the lowest income communities here in Atlanta, people are paying 13 to 15% of their monthly income to pay their utilities. Not only imagine if you're paying that much for utilities, how that takes away from your ability to pay for prescriptions and food. And so we are working with Georgia power and with the Atlanta housing authority, the city of Atlanta to support new and different ways to get at that energy burden. And so that would be my dream that people have acceptable sustainable energy bills.

Charlie ([28:50](#)):

I had no idea what it was. Of course you assume power's a little cheaper here. Electricity is a little cheaper in the Southeast and in Georgia. But you know, obviously air conditioning has a lot more cooling season and heating season. ,I get it, it adds up fast. So I'm glad you're working on that and that's just part of the conversation about the socioeconomic side of sustainability and resiliency. So it sounds like that is part of what you guys do. I gotta get out of here. Do you like to travel? Hey, what's one country or one place you want to go to? What else personally would be on the bucket list.

Mandy ([29:22](#)):

I would like to go to all the places that I do not think will be here in 50 years.

Charlie ([29:27](#)):

All right. touché Wow, that's good. All right.

Mandy ([29:32](#)):

I have a Six year old. We took him to Venice last year.

Charlie ([29:36](#)):

Okay. Yeah, that's definitely one of them. Um, let's talk about books. Just a couple more questions here. Uh, I'm not sure if you'd like to listen to books or pick up a good, a hard copy. Is there a book you recommend?

Mandy ([29:50](#)):

I just finished the book *Salt*. It came out like 10 years ago or so. It is the world according to the history of salt. And it was a fascinating study in natural resource consumption because I had never thought about how essential salt was for refrigeration, the South. Nobody lived in the South air conditioning. And similarly, salt is one of those things that made or broke kingdoms and we just take it for granted now. And there were salt monopolies similar to how we have utility monopolies now. And so I wonder if we shift to truly distributed grid or distributed resources on the grid, you know, but we'd be laughing one day. Electricity was, can you imagine. It was a monopoly at one point. Clearly was when salt was a monopoly. People could not have imagined any other.

Charlie ([30:52](#)):

Well, I have no idea. All right, well we're going to put a link to that book in our podcast show. Thank you for sharing. As we start to wrap up, I have a two part question. One first maybe. Um, any career advice you wish you didn't own a little earlier.

Mandy ([31:07](#)):

It's okay to want to be happy. Like it's okay to want to follow something that really gives you joy. Working in this field can be a slog and you need to follow something that sparks your interest every day that you want to learn about when you're tired, an event you want to go to just because it's fun and I think that that can serve you very well in this field.

Charlie ([31:34](#)):

I love it. Wow. Sometimes you have to give yourself permission, right? That's okay. And in closing, so green building movement, maybe even policy related, any words of encouragement for someone jumping in right now to this movement,

Mandy ([31:47](#)):

There is more opportunity than ever before to advance the green building space. So figure out what you love in it and you will find an affinity group and use that to just make some magic.

Charlie ([32:02](#)):

Wow. Mandy, thank you so much. This has been Mandy Mahoney, a big footprint, very green footprint across Atlanta and the Southeast. Just want to say thank you. Keep up the great work and see ya. And thanks for being on the podcast. This was awesome.

Mandy ([32:16](#)):

Thank you Charlie.

Charlie ([32:19](#)):

I just want to say thank you to our loyal listeners. We actually are celebrating over one year here on the green building matters podcast, me and the entire team are stoked and just so glad you to continue to listen every Wednesday morning to a new interview with a green building professional here in this industry or just some pro tips that we want to make sure you are getting straight from us. Straight to you. Thank you for listening to this episode of the green building matters projects@gbes.com our mission is to advance the green building movement through best-in-class education and encouragement. Remember, you can go to gbes.com/podcast or any notes and links that we mentioned in today's episode, and you can actually see the other episodes that have already been recorded with our amazing yes, please tell your friends about this podcast, tell your colleagues, and if you really enjoyed it, leave a positive review on iTunes. Thank you so much and we'll see you in next week's episode.