

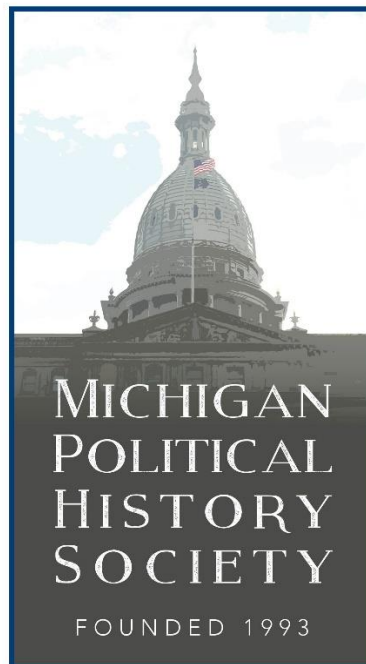
THOMAS J. CLEARY

Interviewed by

Larry Lee

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This conversation with Thomas J. Cleary is part of the James J. Blanchard Living Library of Michigan Political History, a project of the Michigan Political History Society.

- Larry Lee: Hi. I'm Larry Lee. I'm retired vice president of Gongwer News Service. Today, we're here to talk with Thomas Cleary who was a political history important figure in Michigan because he founded the first multi-client lobbying firm in Michigan Legislative Consultants. Before that, he was deputy to the last elected treasurer of the state of Michigan under the prior constitution and, in that role, one of the few people still around who served under a prior constitution.
- Larry Lee: His story, though, begins in the Upper Peninsula where he was raised and where his father introduced him to politics, so let's start there, Tom. Let's talk about what your life was like up there with your father and learning politics.
- Thomas Cleary: Well, thank you, Larry. The main point I need to make is, starting out, I have to talk about my father because we were a political family in that my dad was county Democratic chairman from 1929 until he died in 1953 on Mackinac Island. As county Democratic chairman in the '30s and in the '40s, the UP was very Democratic. Our 15 counties had chairmen that were all mostly of Irish descent. Okay? I just grew up in that kind of a condition.
- Thomas Cleary: I would say, as an aside, in the '30s, a very important political figure, Governor Frank Murphy, a former mayor of Detroit, was governor of Michigan and then went on to become attorney general under President Roosevelt and also a United States Supreme Court justice under President Roosevelt. Anyway, he visited our family home when I was four years old to campaign in the '30s. I guess that was my start of real exposure and understanding. I had the opportunity to watch my dad as he fulfilled his duties as the chair of the county and as a leader in the Upper Peninsula Democrats.
- Thomas Cleary: My dad never ran for anything. He always liked to be the county chair. In that process, he never asked for anything. The only thing he ever enjoyed having was an appointment to the Mackinac Island State Park Commission. He served those appointments of Governor Frank Murphy. Later on, Governor Van Wagener appointed him, reappointed him to the commission. Finally, Governor Williams appointed him. That's how we got our family interested in Mackinac Island.
- Larry Lee: Your family was interested in the island. You were interested in keeping your family in touch with the UP. You went there for vacations for decades as taking your whole family up there.
- Thomas Cleary: Well, and then in that process, I became interested in government, I really did, and in politics.
- Larry Lee: How was it that, at four, the visit from Governor Murphy attracted your interest that you could remember this now?

Thomas Cleary: No, I didn't.

Larry Lee: It's all family stories?

Thomas Cleary: A review of history.

Larry Lee: Okay.

Thomas Cleary: Obviously, I had no concept of what was going on at the age of four, but as I look back and review, I can now see that just observing my father and how he operated and how he did things, my goodness. He was a World War II veteran, served in France, and very committed. My three older brothers served in World War II, one in the Army, one in the Navy, and one in the Marine Corps. Then, later on, I served in the Air Force during the Korean War. Anyway, we were a family who was committed to veterans. My dad was committed to veterans, volunteered in the American Legions, Veterans Affairs, and things of that nature.

Thomas Cleary: In my own case, I graduated from Escanaba High School in 1950. I did not go to college right away, went into the United States Air Force for four years and then got out of the service in 1954, went to Marquette University in Milwaukee, and then moved back to Escanaba.

Larry Lee: You got a degree in business administration at Marquette. What did you think you were going to do with that?

Thomas Cleary: I was going back to Escanaba and probably get involved locally in politics and live my life there. Things changed.

Larry Lee: Things changed. You also met Barbara and married your wife.

Thomas Cleary: Actually, we started our family while I was midway in college. We had a son Michael in Milwaukee and got back home and had a son John, our second child, while we were in Escanaba. Anyway, I moved back to Escanaba, got involved politically as part of the country Democratic Party and met candidates as they came campaigning in Escanaba. This is in 1958.

Thomas Cleary: Well, my life got changed. In 1959, I had been a year in Escanaba doing okay, was with the Prudential Insurance Company, active locally politically. I got a call from Sanford Brown who was the state treasurer of Michigan who I had met a couple of times.

Larry Lee: You had already met him as part of that whole family upbringing.

Thomas Cleary: Right, and his campaigning in the Escanaba area. Anyway, he called and said, "Tom, I'd like you to think about being my deputy in the state, deputy state treasurer." I thought, "Whoa, that's interesting." Anyway, I went over to

Drummond Island, had an interview. He had a summer cottage there. Lo and behold, I accepted the appointment as deputy state treasurer. This is in June of 1959, so moved the family.

Larry Lee: Down to Lansing.

Thomas Cleary: Down to Lansing. You know, it was an interesting period in my life. I had the opportunity to learn more about state government and more about the state political process. In the six years, I was deputy in the state treasurer to the last elected state treasurer. The state treasurer, of course, is part of a governor's cabinet.

Larry Lee: Correct.

Thomas Cleary: I served two years, the last term of Governor Williams, Governor Swainson's one two-year term, and then Governor Romney. By that time of Governor Romney, those last two years as deputy in the treasurer was really during a period of the implementation of the 1963 constitution.

Larry Lee: Hugely important period of Michigan political history.

Thomas Cleary: Right, and a huge, important part of my life.

Larry Lee: Of your life.

Thomas Cleary: Yes, because, for all intents and purposes, the voters kicked me out.

Larry Lee: So ...

Thomas Cleary: Let me explain why that happened or how it happened. Up until the 1963 constitution, we had an elected state treasurer, nominated by political party. The '63 constitution changed that. The state treasurer's job became appointive by the governor. Well, Governor Romney was a Republican. Sandy Brown was a Democrat. I was a Democrat. It was time for this political appointee to move on to something else.

Larry Lee: Right. Before we do that, though, talk a little bit about what you did as deputy and how that shaped some of the information that you developed about government and how it worked.

Thomas Cleary: I'll answer that, Larry, but first let me emphasize that the last two years in that period with Governor Romney was really the implementation period of the '63 constitution. Having served as the deputy state treasurer, let me put it in perspective. Prior to the '63 constitution, the state treasurer's job was to collect the money and pay the bills. There were 128 agencies that reported to the governor, okay, and we had about, I'd say, 100 employees.

Larry Lee: By comparison, the 128 in the new constitution gets shrunk down to just 20.

Thomas Cleary: 21. We didn't have to deal with enforcement or anything like that, just collect the money, deposit it in the bank, and pay the bills, and keep track of it that way. You have an elected state treasurer who's part of the administrative board and if the state treasure was out or not available, the deputy would represent him at meetings and things of that nature.

Larry Lee: Where contracts were decided. All kinds of just operational.

Thomas Cleary: It gave me an opportunity to see how state government worked. It really, really did. I was interested in that. It also gave me an opportunity because you were the non-civil service number-two person in the treasury. It gave me an opportunity to be part of the Democratic team. We had an elected state treasurer, an elected secretary of state, an elected attorney general, elected highway commissioner, an auditor general, a superintendent of public construction. These were all part of the state administrative board that fulfilled the contracts and committee meetings and what have you.

Larry Lee: And cabinet meetings that you also did weekly.

Thomas Cleary: Well, Governor Williams would have a press conference twice a day. The cabinet would meet every day at 9:00 in the morning with the governor just to review what was going on. It'd only take about 10-15 minutes. That was an important process for me in understanding how state government worked. I enjoyed that.

Thomas Cleary: The other part of it was the political part of it. You're working for an elected state official, and you're all part of the Democratic team and you're coordinated as part of a team, and you run as part of a team. You're not individually out there. I had an opportunity to be involved with the Democratic Party statewide.

Thomas Cleary: As an aside, I had the opportunity to be a delegate in 1960 when John Kennedy was nominated president, to go out to California and be part of that convention, so that was all part of my interest in training and what have you.

Thomas Cleary: Then we come to, during that period of time, my family was growing. I will stop for a minute to talk about my family.

Larry Lee: By now, you had several children.

Thomas Cleary: I had, I believe, five children by the time I was through with my career with the treasurer's office. Today, I'm fortunate enough to have had nine children. One has since passed away. I've got 22 grandchildren and 7 great-grandchildren, and I'm all very proud of them. Most of them live in the Lansing area and are close by, so it makes for a very interesting family life.

Larry Lee: You're very close to the family. Some are in politics, sort of, and some are not. Some are less interested.

Thomas Cleary: Anyway, we come to the Romney era. We've got a new constitution. The treasurer's office is split up, and we now have a legislative auditor general rather than an elected auditor general. We have an appointed state treasurer rather than a elected state treasurer. It took a year and a half or so to implement the changes.

Larry Lee: Right, adopted in '63 in a special election and then, sure, then you go along. The first election that it affected was 1964.

Thomas Cleary: Yeah.

Larry Lee: 1965, Tom Cleary is looking at now what?

Thomas Cleary: What am I going to do when I've got five children? I kind of like it, and my wife and family like it in Lansing. I had an opportunity to, and I thought about it, "I think I'll give lobbying a chance."

Larry Lee: Was that so automatic a decision, though? I mean you could have stayed in government too in some role, I assume, with your knowledge, even though it was partisan. Doesn't naturally seem like you would say, "Let me give lobbying a try," when it's a risk.

Thomas Cleary: That's a good point.

Larry Lee: It's a risk.

Thomas Cleary: Well, absolutely. I did not think about staying in state government. Well, you're a Democratic appointee, and now you have a Republican governor, and you're going to have a Republican appointment. Right, it's a good point, Larry, and I thought about it, and I thought about it. Well, I've got the experience. I understand government. I understand politics, I think I'll give lobbying a try, see how it works. Talked it over with my wife and family and said, you know, let's give it a try. I had one client to start off with and went on from there.

Larry Lee: That client?

Thomas Cleary: That client. The first client, Larry, was dog racing. I had a contract for a year and it's interesting. In '65, in first part of '65 when I was started, we had a Democratic house and a Democratic senate and, of course, Governor Romney.

Larry Lee: Governor Romney.

Thomas Cleary: There was a syndicated group of respected investors who wanted to get the law changed to permit dog racing in Michigan. Well, there were other groups that

wanted dog racing also, but anyway, and we were not successful in that attempt.

Larry Lee: That attempt never was successful in Michigan.

Thomas Cleary: There are two reasons why dog racing was not accepted. The evangelical churches in Michigan were opposed to dog racing because it was an expansion of gambling. Also, the horse racing industry was exposed to gambling because they didn't want the competition of dog racing.

Larry Lee: It was basically the only legal gambling we had.

Thomas Cleary: Right. To this day, there is no dog racing in Michigan.

Larry Lee: There's no dog racing.

Thomas Cleary: For a number of years, there has not been any attempt. In fact, the biggest attempt right now is to preserve horse racing. Anyway, that was my first year, my opportunity to get my feet wet. The head guy of this investment group that I worked for was Win Schuler. And he was a fun guy to work with.

Larry Lee: Owner of a famous restaurant in Marshall, Michigan.

Thomas Cleary: Right. And, well it's still there. And we'd take groups of lawmakers over to Marshall to talk to Win and to get a feel for what we're trying to do and that sort of thing. But it also gave me a chance to get my feet wet as a lobbyist.

Larry Lee: Right. And so what you did was not just decide to become a lobbyist. You essentially created something that Michigan didn't have before, which was a multi-client lobbyist, rather than a lobbyist for one entity, one group.

Thomas Cleary: And I really didn't think that through, that that's what I was doing, but that is in fact what I did. And at that time, big lobbying efforts, if you had a big problem, you probably hired a law firm in Lansing. But there were associations coming into the lobbying field that wanted to get involved, and didn't really know how to go about it. So I had an opportunity to, in the first two or three years, to do lobbying work with associations and they often didn't understand government at all. And to me it was a great opportunity to teach groups that hired you. I'd say, "Well, now wait a minute. Tell me about what you're concerned about and what you expect from the legislature, and are you looking for a lobbyist just to protect your interests, or are you looking for a lobbyist to accomplish something, to get a bill passed or to achieve something."

Thomas Cleary: I found that opportunity to teach leadership of associations, how government worked.

Larry Lee: And that was a niche that other people who called themselves lobbyists didn't do at the time, to do work with associations and organizations in some role.

Thomas Cleary: That's correct.

Larry Lee: An administrator, or...

Thomas Cleary: And it took about three to five years to pick up and have four or five clients, to really see if I was going to stay in it. And it worked out.

Larry Lee: Right. But a couple of things. I mean, it must've been a bit of a struggle.

Thomas Cleary: It was a big struggle.

Larry Lee: Big struggle. And what are you telling, what are you reassuring your prospective clients with your new guy in town? They don't know whether you're going to be around or not, really.

Thomas Cleary: To begin with, they were smaller groups and I had to grow and I had to teach. I had to take clients and say, "No, that's not realistic what you want. Let's see if we can bring that down a little bit, and maybe if you get part of what you want the first year, you can come back later and see how that works." One of the things that I felt very strongly about when I represented an association was that it was in partnership with that group, and I expected them to take the time to talk to their own local lawmaker to let them know what they were interested in and to establish a relationship. Because if you're representing a group, Larry, and you have people that are taking the time to let their lawmaker know at the local level what they're interested in and what they want and what they expect, it's very helpful. I mean, you can be in Lansing as a lobbyist, but if the lawmaker says to you, "Well, Maryanne back home says this," and that's pretty much what you've been saying, I can go along with that. And that sort of thing.

Larry Lee: Right.

Thomas Cleary: And it doesn't take too many contacts locally to get a lawmaker to say, "Ooh, if there's four or five people talking to me about that issue, there's probably a lot more the same way that haven't talked to me. So I better pay attention to what's going on."

Larry Lee: So talk about how you developed your whole approach to what lobbying should be. And you've also talked about lifestyle things that you had to adjust as you went into this to get credibility.

Thomas Cleary: To start with, I had a philosophy, and then I still believe it, that the lawmaking process is very respectable and very important. Because we have elected officials to do collectively for us what we can't do for ourselves, like the building of roads and the universities and the education. Now, in that process, there are

proposals that are made in the legislative process. And I strongly feel that if there's an issue out there that's controversial, it's very important that all the different points of view be expressed in that process. The lawmakers have all the points of view projected. They usually make good decisions. And oftentimes they'll say, "Well, we're not ready for that." Or, "Yeah, it's a good idea, but where's the money gonna come from?" And of course the budget process is very important in this whole process.

Thomas Cleary: So the lobbyist's job is really to sort through, and to help your client, be it a company, be it a hospital, whatever, to understand the process and to be involved in that process. And actually in many ways to help the lawmakers really understand how they're going to be affected, how society's gonna be affected.

Larry Lee: All part of that teaching you talk about.

Thomas Cleary: Yeah. That was the challenge, I thought, and I enjoyed it. I did it for 30 years. The first 15 years I did it, I did it by myself. And it got to the point that I really couldn't serve the clients just by myself. I needed to expand, what have you.

Larry Lee: Well, I think especially when you're doing the association part of it, plus the lobbying part of it. And you had clients going way back that.

Thomas Cleary: They're still with the firm.

Larry Lee: Still with the firm. Some for a long time with the firm, like the broadcasters, who did a lot with that.

Thomas Cleary: And McDonald's.

Larry Lee: McDonald's, right.

Thomas Cleary: And the judges. It became a very interesting occupation. It really did.

Larry Lee: And you had to deal with things that lobbyists prior to you didn't deal with, which is conflicts between a client you might have and one you might be looking at. How did you deal with that?

Thomas Cleary: Yeah, very good point. Good point. What you're talking about is potential conflicts of interest.

Larry Lee: Correct.

Thomas Cleary: Or conflicts of interest that right off the bat you say, "Hey, I can't take you as a client because I represent this client."

Larry Lee: Correct.

Thomas Cleary: But always, whenever there was a perspective client I was being interviewed or talked about, I would review for myself and for that prospect, here's who I represent. Are there any conflicts of interest here that you can see? So I would try to, early on, determine whether there was a conflict or what have you.

Thomas Cleary: The other thing that was so important for our firm, and actually for any firm in the lobbying business, is credibility. What do the lawmakers think of you, or of your firm? Are you honest to deal with and things of that nature? And I was very proud to say over the years, our firm developed a very respected reputation, within both parties, so I never had a problem. I had a Democratic background, of course, but I could work very well with each party.

Larry Lee: Because what you were dealing with where the interests of your client.

Thomas Cleary: That's right. That's right. And teaching the client.

Larry Lee: Right.

Thomas Cleary: And making them a part of the process, and getting them involved. And I would never as a lobbyist, very seldom testify on a bill or anything. We would always get the client to bring in their best people, to explain what they wanted or why they're opposed and that sort of thing. And here you get back to what I felt, always felt. If all the points of view are expressed on any given issue, the lawmakers usually make the right decision.

Larry Lee: And you talk about the credibility of the firm, Michigan Legislative Consultants. What's the biggest risks as you look back that could have undermined that credibility, and you didn't, you preserved the credibility of the firm?

Thomas Cleary: Honesty. No shady deals or anything like that. There's all kinds of lawmakers. You get to know the good ones and the bad ones, and that sort of thing. And you work with leadership in the party, leadership in the legislative process. And then very, very careful about who comes into your firm. There's some clients you would not take under any circumstance.

Larry Lee: Because?

Thomas Cleary: For a variety of reasons. Probably because they were wheeler dealer type clients that you would rather not be involved with.

Larry Lee: Which almost leads into, there's so much money in politics, and one of the things you have to be very clear about is you can't expect a vote because of any money considerations.

Thomas Cleary: Oh, that's right. Absolutely. When you have a relationship with a client, it would be illegal to have a contract or a relationship based on your compensation

depending on whether you do or don't get something passed, or you do or don't kill a bill. That's a no no.

Larry Lee: Right.

Thomas Cleary: You put your reputation out there and if they want to hire you, you'll do the best you can, and that's served us well. But anyway, as we grew, about the halfway point after 15 years, it was quite obvious to me, I had to expand, get some people in. And the firm did. We hired a couple people over the next 15 years. And the firm has grown, and they're still around. And we're very satisfied.

Larry Lee: You're very proud of what that firm is.

Thomas Cleary: Yeah. And 50 years later, the firm, still in business.

Larry Lee: It did celebrate its 50th anniversary.

Thomas Cleary: Yeah. A couple of years ago. And it's grown and grown and grown. But it's a good firm.

Larry Lee: First you hired Fritz Benson to help out, and then Mike Bush, a Republican, your first.

Thomas Cleary: Yeah. Hired those two, and the firm grew, and the reputation grew, and there we are.

Larry Lee: Right. When we talk about political history, more we seem to focus on elected officials or of that nature, but lobbying is part of political history. Talk about how you view lobbying within Michigan's political history.

Thomas Cleary: I guess I would say it this way. There's a lot of different players in the making of laws. There's the elected officials themselves, the legislators. But there are interest groups. There are companies that are affected. There are associations that are affected. There are, too often when a proposal is being considered, there's winners and losers, and you have to be very careful that you get all the points of view involved. So anyway, in the lawmaking process, you have interest groups, you have lobbyists, you have elected officials, you have citizens. It's just, it's an interesting process, and I found that to be a very, a good process.

Thomas Cleary: There's an old saying, you don't want to watch the making of sausage or the making the laws, but you have to get involved. You have to get involved.

Larry Lee: It can get messy.

Thomas Cleary: Oh, it can get very messy. Well, and here Larry, the media is a part of this. A very important part of this. And if we didn't have the media reporting what's going on, the good and the bad, we wouldn't know. Now over the years, as you know

better than I do, when you first started, it was the print media that was really where you got the depth of understanding of what was going on. Then you got television, and then you got radio, and now today you got the social media and all the other stuff that I can't keep track of.

Larry Lee: Thankfully you have Barb, your wife, who does keep track of it.

Thomas Cleary: Right.

Larry Lee: And so, you've seen lobbying changed dramatically from when you started this venture until, I mean, now we have 3,000 or more registered lobbyists, back when you started.

Thomas Cleary: The truth of the matter is most political issues involve money one way or the other.

Larry Lee: Right.

Thomas Cleary: If you can trace it through. And it's expensive to run for office. I have great respect for the lawmakers, they have to be able to take, to raise money and not promise anything except good government as a recipient of that money. And of course, all too often, interest groups give money because they want something. Well, it's a fine line.

Larry Lee: Right.

Thomas Cleary: But it can be balanced. We've seen it over and over again.

Larry Lee: And we saw the whole development of fundraisers in Lansing that all week long, it was almost, you had to go.

Thomas Cleary: Yeah. But that's part of the process.

Larry Lee: Yeah.

Thomas Cleary: And so we live with that, that whole attitude. But we have to end up with the process I'm talking about. All the points of view are gathered in and all the players get an opportunity to have their say, and then you live with the result, so to speak.

Larry Lee: And another role that you evolved into fulfilling was advising your clients if they had a PAC, most of them probably, how do you do that, talk about that part?

Thomas Cleary: Oh yeah. Right. There's two ways to be involved with a client. You can help them locally at home, knocking on doors and being involved in their campaign, or you can give them money or raise money for them. But we don't have public funding of our legislative campaigns or what have you, so you've gotta raise the money

to get your message out to what you're about, what you're trying to do. And we go from there.

Thomas Cleary: One of the things that's always talked about is disclosure okay? You can give money to somebody, but a candidate has to and should report where they get their money so that everybody knows who's involved in the process and how and why and what have you. And all too often as we know in today's world, corporations can give money and some kind of money doesn't have to be disclosed and what have you and this is a messy process that we have to sort through.

Larry Lee: Do you have any sense of where lobbying is headed?

Thomas Cleary: No, we're always gonna have lobbyists of some kind.

Larry Lee: I think you partly described that as part of the first amendment actually. How you petition government?

Thomas Cleary: That's right. A lot of people that are involved in government, whether they've been in government for a while and then you go out and lobbyists but you're still part of the process, you're part of the process and it's not gonna change. And that's a great process and I've enjoyed it, I respect it, I watch it and I'm interested in it.

Larry Lee: You're still interested in politics?

Thomas Cleary: Well of course as you know, I do it through involvement with the Political History Society, because it's important to know political history, the past. If you know the past, you've got experience and maybe you won't make the same mistake again.

Larry Lee: Yep.

Thomas Cleary: I find it very interesting.

Larry Lee: And what you did, you took an idea, by Kevin Kelly to have a library.

Thomas Cleary: Yeah, we'd been pushing.

Larry Lee: Some bones to establish a political history library here in Michigan.

Thomas Cleary: Right, right. You're involved in that as well.

Larry Lee: Many of your own books form the core of this and other donated books.

Thomas Cleary: Right, it's all part of the big picture.

Larry Lee: Right, because that does reflect your interest.

Thomas Cleary: Yeah I will always have that interest and like you said. My children are interested and that's because they're part of the family, like I learned it from my father, they're learning it from our family, so.

Larry Lee: Well you had dinner table conversations growing up about politics, you exposed your children to much the same?

Thomas Cleary: You know your children learn, even if you don't say anything. They see what you do and what you're involved in and it's good, it's good. Here again, I'm so pleased that I was able to have nine children and grandchildren and enjoy that for the last 20 years, so it's been a good life Larry.

Larry Lee: It has been and you met all these political figures, not just Governor Murphy, but Soapy Williams, Senator Hart.

Thomas Cleary: John Swainson.

Larry Lee: John Swainson, Governors.

Thomas Cleary: Congressmen and interesting state law makers. You and I had a mutual friend in Bill Ryan who was speaker in the House for years.

Larry Lee: Transcendent kind of leader, yeah.

Thomas Cleary: You know and it's interesting, because you have all these elected officials, they're represented to move society. So no more different bills, good lawmakers, bad law, boy, girl and what have you. Now it's interesting, we're finally coming to the point that women are getting respected in the way they should, like into office and what have you.

Larry Lee: And in the lobbying core?

Thomas Cleary: In the lobbying core, at all levels, judicial core.

Larry Lee: MLC has women in its firm.

Thomas Cleary: Well that's good, that's good. For all too long it was just a man's world while we're increasing, so I'm very hopeful about the future.

Larry Lee: Well this has been fun Tom.

Thomas Cleary: Yeah, very satisfying.

Larry Lee:

Pretty good. Thank you very much, this has been a great conversation about lobbying in Michigan and a multi-client inventor, here with us today, Tom Cleary, thank you.

Thomas Cleary:

Thank you.