

**SMALL
NATION™**

ACHIEVING SUCCESS IN A SMALL TOWN

THE STORY OF BELLEFONTAINE, OHIO

RISING AGAINST THE TIDE.

Bellefontaine, Ohio is like hundreds of other small towns across the United States. Twenty-five miles from the nearest major interstate and an hour from the nearest metropolitan area, Bellefontaine is surrounded by rural, rolling farmland and 14,000 smart, hard-working working Americans in search of opportunity, community and a sense of home for their families.

Over the years, the automotive industry has supplied a large number of our town's citizens a means for creating a happy living. Unfortunately, this economic driver wasn't enough for the long term. Not long ago, Bellefontaine became one of many small towns across the country that succumbed to struggle. The town was existing on life support, and quite frankly, no one was sure what to do about it.

Bellefontaine's story is the story of so many small towns in our nation. As larger communities across the country continue to grow and expand economically, culturally and technologically, small towns have found themselves in a state of crisis, and the reasons why are numerous, complicated and intertwined.

Industry, the historical economic driver in small towns, is becoming more difficult to attract and retain. While small towns were once a sound decision for industrial and manufacturing companies because of low costs and a plentiful workforce, today that isn't always the case. Young people have been choosing to leave small towns en masse. A large portion of the population that is of working age have left their home towns for opportunities that they perceive to be elsewhere. Others have reached retirement age, and although they stay in their small towns to age in place, the increase in fixed incomes within the communities begins to lead buying decisions as well as what is offered for purchase by local businesses. The shift in local demographics and offerings plants the perception that new opportunities are minimal. More people leave. Population reduces. More businesses close. The rate of commerce begins to decline. The tax base declines, followed by a lapse in infrastructure upkeep. Schools decline, so young families don't want to relocate there. New businesses don't move in because the of the lack of traffic and no plans for growth.

City leadership in small towns has been working hard to try to stop the bleeding and remedy the situation by zeroing in on economic development through industry. Their plan is to attract the businesses that will bring new jobs to town and the people will come where employment is plentiful. Today however, existing industry is having a difficult time filling its current leadership and workforce positions with qualified candidates. Their recruitment and retention issues are real, from executive leadership through general laborers. The pool of qualified workers has dwindled and those who are available don't always have the right skills.

Why are small towns in trouble? Because a large part of the rural brain drain epidemic across the country isn't "just" about available jobs. It's also about lifestyle choices. **It's about the experience of living interesting and flavorful lives in a particular place day after day.** Those who have the capacity and passion to help small communities grow are simply choosing different towns in which to live, work and reinvest.

But it doesn't have to be this way.

SUCCESS HAPPENS BY THINKING DIFFERENTLY

SIX HUNDRED
— DOWNTOWN —

SIX HUNDRED DOWNTOWN, 108 South Main St., before and after redevelopment. Learn more at 600downtown.com

Economic development that focuses only on the attraction of industry is missing a crucial part of the success puzzle. To keep young people engaged with their home community and attract new residents, city leaders simply have to think about revitalization in a different way. By focusing on the improvement of downtown areas, an energy and vibrancy is created that attracts people, money, and a sense of community pride.

RESOURCES, RESOLVE, AND VISION

Bellefontaine's rich agricultural roots, manufacturing economy, abundant natural land features, and unique small business climate have made this small town a destination for food, shopping and entertainment.

Located in Logan County, one of 11 counties in the greater Columbus Region, Bellefontaine, Ohio, is a small town full of hardworking people, affordable real estate, sparkling community charm, and a big vision for progress.

Bellefontaine is 35 minutes from I-75 and less than one hour from downtown Columbus. Bordered by US 33, a 4-lane highway that sees 23,000 vehicles daily, the town is home to one of the largest concentrations of manufacturers, R&D firms, and logistics companies in Ohio.



POPULATION (CITY, 2021)

14,115

POPULATION (COUNTY, 2021)

46,150

BUSINESSES (CITY)

959

BUSINESSES (COUNTY)

2,908

MEDIAN AGE

32.7

MEDIAN INCOME

\$43,240

HIGH SCHOOL GRADS

89.7%

BACHELORS OR HIGHER

17.1%

HOUSING UNITS (CITY)

6,151

HOUSING UNITS (COUNTY)

23,343

MEDIAN PROPERTY VALUE

\$97,700

10
YEARS

7
NEW
DOWNTOWN
EATERIES



17



NEW SPECIALTY RETAIL STORES

3



**EVENT
CENTERS**

56+

**HISTORIC BUILDINGS &
STOREFRONTS RENOVATED**



34+

**UPPER FLOOR
APARTMENTS**



\$30M+

IN NEW PRIVATE INVESTMENT

**SMALL
NATION**

OVER 180 NEW DOWNTOWN JOBS



The 200 block of Columbus Avenue prior to redevelopment

Small towns are now in a position where they’re competing for market share. To survive, and eventually to win the interest and loyalty of a young and energized citizenry, they have to reposition themselves and create new opportunities and experiences. Even if it’s from the ground up.

Small Town Vision

The Small Town Story is the same again and again, in town after town across the country. Fortunately, it’s a cycle of decline that doesn’t have to happen. There is a solution... one that requires grit, vision and the willingness to break a few traditional rules.

Jason Duff, Small Nation Founder and CEO, watched Bellefontaine’s decline for years. Downtown, as people and businesses left the area, storefront after storefront eventually closed, shuttered their windows and left the historic building structures of the city empty. There were very few small business entrepreneurs left to open new stores and little to no traffic to support the businesses that were fighting to survive. At one point, more than 70 percent of the first-floor spaces were vacant. Many of the town’s historic buildings fell into decline and with no upkeep, some literally began to crumble.

The energy had left downtown Bellefontaine and no one was doing anything about it.

Jason and his team knew that shifting Bellefontaine’s direction was possible... but it had to happen from within the community. Like in many small towns, Bellefontaine was full of fiercely smart people with finely honed skills, talents, knowledge and most importantly, the hunger for success. They just weren’t sure where to start. When the town was in its worst state, it made recovery seem overwhelming and the potential for individual entrepreneurial success nearly impossible. In order for anyone to take the leap into new ideas or building renovation, most needed evidence that it was indeed possible. Someone had to be first to push ideas and opinions about the area into reality; to show evidence of potential. The Small Nation team got tired of waiting around for someone else to “fix it,” so they decided to roll up their sleeves and do it themselves.

The first step was to create a strong, multi-faceted strategy for recovery and growth. It would require smart investments, strategic business placement and the right people to carry the plan forward.

The next step was to identify the first anchor; a structure that would serve as a beacon of possibility for all.

Starting Small... with Big Intentions

Right in the middle of town was the perfect solution. Once known as C.G. Murphy’s, there was a historic downtown property that had fallen into decline. The Small



The 200 block of Columbus Avenue after redevelopment

Nation team was looking for an idea that would allow them to not only bring a multiplied return on their investment, but bring a solution to the town that would be a catalyst for the development of multiple small businesses.

The team decided to convert the old C.G. Murphy’s store into a marketplace concept, bringing “Main Street” inside the property at a smaller scale. In order to succeed, the “Main Street Marketplace” would need to not only have tenants, but an entertaining, welcoming experience.

The single storefront was converted into multiple suites, each with its own unique façade, storefront windows, commercial grade doors, and character.

By reducing “Main Street” to a smaller scale, the Small Nation team has been able to offer retail spaces with smaller square footage and reduced rental rates to entrepreneurs who were just starting up. For the vendor, expenses that might have once seemed prohibitive to opening a business like utility costs or storefront signage are no longer an issue. Main Street Marketplace functions as a small business incubator of sorts, allowing businesses to start small and hone their skills as an entrepreneur while

keeping startup costs low. The Marketplace has placed a beauty salon and a specialty retail store as the anchors to the property with windowed frontage along Main Street. Further within the doors, you’ll find a mix of tenants similar to a normal downtown area, ranging from professional services to massage therapy, clothing boutiques, self-defense training services, a mortgage bank, a hypnotherapist and even a gun shop.

Jazzercise classes are held on the second floor of the property and the back entrance is anchored by an amazing artisan bakery offering hand made breads, bagels and sandwiches for local patrons to enjoy. The basement of the property is also used for office rental space, allowing every inch of the property to be utilized.

In total, Small Nation invested \$350,000 into the renovation of the property. It houses 20 rental spaces and estimates 150 people move through the space daily.

Renovation of a historic structure can quite literally shift the opinions and energy of a community. Buzz began to build in Bellefontaine, and plans for their next projects began.

“ Like in many small towns, Bellefontaine was full of fiercely smart people with finely honed skills, talents, knowledge and most importantly, the hunger for success. They just weren’t sure where to start. ”

Jason Duff, Small Nation Founder and CEO

The transition of Bellefontaine, Ohio from shuttered and crumbling to rich, cooperative and vibrant took teamwork. While Small Nation’s team focused on a strategy for renovation and revitalization, it took the cooperation of local government and the determination of local business owners to make the town a true success. Our “Heroes” are the small business entrepreneurs who work so hard every day to bring opportunities to our community.

Bellefontaine has completely turned around... because Small Nation's approach to development was about more than bricks and mortar. Yes, we develop real estate. But we also develop the businesses and the people who will run them.

Considering what’s best for all is the secret to our success.

BEFORE

AFTER

ENTREPRENEUR

BREWFONTAINE
211 S. Main St.



BEFORE

AFTER

ENTREPRENEUR

FLYING PEPPER CANTINA
137 W. Columbus Ave.



ANYTIME FITNESS
210 W. Columbus Ave.



SIX HUNDRED DOWNTOWN
108 S. Main St.

OLDE MINT ANTIQUES
135 W. Columbus Ave.



UNDERTONE BEAUTY BAR
129 W. Columbus Ave

CITY SWEETS & CREAMERY
222 S. Main St.



HICKORY DIRECT MEDICAL
208 W. Columbus Ave.



Main Street Marketplace prior to redevelopment



Main Street Marketplace after redevelopment



"Mini" Main Street Inside the Marketplace

A Different Kind of Development

Bringing a symbol of prosperity back to life in Bellefontaine was the first step toward energizing the town as a whole. As the Small Nation team worked to make the building better, they also began a plan to make the area better as a whole. If they were to be developers, they would “develop” in every sense of the word.

The Small Nation Team wouldn’t just develop individual buildings. Improving one building that doesn’t have a positive and cumulative effect on the others in the area doesn’t make much sense. As buildings were selected, so were business types. The team, in cooperation with the town via social media discussions, strategized about what kind of businesses would best support the growth and needs of the community, the desires of visitors, and what kinds of businesses would best support one another.



“ As a lifelong advocate for Small Business owners, I can’t say enough good about the energy, drive and thought-leadership Small Nation is doing to advance the work of small business owners all around the country. ”

Karen Kerrigan, President & CEO Small Business and Entrepreneurship Council & FOX BUSINESS Contributor

Renovating one building might re-energize people, but it doesn’t have much of an effect on the well being of all. Instead, the team decided they would develop community. Their efforts would include not only the individual places, but the people, the energy and experience, and the overall capacity for commerce and spirit.

Main Street Marketplace became the catalyst for a series of smart purchases, historic renovations, strategic plans for business and tenant types, recruitment of entrepre-

neurs, mentoring sessions and marketing initiatives. Over the years, Small Nation’s approach to development and revitalization in Bellefontaine became holistic and all encompassing, mainly because the needs of small towns are simply different than that of their more urban neighbors.

In small towns, it’s not just a matter of dollars and cents. It’s about verbalizing the bigger vision, creating an authentic experience, offering attraction and financial incentives that are above the norm, and providing guidance every step of the way. Providing the places isn’t enough for a quick turnaround. It takes offering other methods of support to gain traction and begin to see results.

Over the years, the Small Nation team worked with their tenant partners doing just about anything they needed to do to see change happen in Bellefontaine. Yes, they renovated the buildings, but they also rolled up their sleeves and got their hands dirty. The slung beer, dropped fries and tossed pizzas. When a great idea presented itself from a small business entrepreneur, they opened up their coffers to help it grow. They crunched numbers, pushed forward restrictive codes and even started new businesses themselves to help fund forward progress.

From 2012 to the present, the Small Nation team has been continuously working to identify new business types and small business entrepreneurs that will further support Bellefontaine’s growth. One of the first and most important

businesses they pushed forward was an anchor restaurant. Restaurants — especially those with outside seating — are crucial to the success of downtown areas. They bring a community together, provide enjoyable life experiences, and animate downtown areas at all hours of the day, bringing the potential for commerce and multiple purchases at neighboring stores.

The Small Nation team actively recruited a world-renowned pizza champion to open Six Hundred Downtown, and since that time, it has grown into a hot-spot for residents and visitors alike. On weekends, Six Hundred’s unique pizza recipes draw people from over an hour away to Bellefontaine. They come early, shop for antiques at Nest 1896 or Olde Mint, shop for clothes at unboxed boutique or Simply Torn, eat an award winning dinner, then stay for dessert at neighboring Whit’s Frozen Custard or City Sweets and Creamery. Before heading home, Native Coffee or Sweet Aromas fuels them for their drive.

Locals start their mornings at Anytime Fitness, LoCo Depot or Homegrown Yoga. They have a cut or highlight at Undertones then meet with their accountant in the Marketplace. After work, they stop by for one of many rotating craft beers at Brewfontaine. Special work related meetings, events or family celebrations are enjoyed at Bella Vino Events & Wine Room. Then some go home to their open, airy luxury apartments overlooking the courthouse at Lofts 110.

One of Small Nation’s newest projects, The Syndicate, opened in 2020. The Syndicate brings a much-needed upscale dining experience to town, offering steaks, seafood and a proper weekend brunch, complete with very popular mimosa flights. In the back, The Syndicate has created a Beer Garden with a stage for live music in the warmer seasons.

Development of The Syndicate has been made possible through Bellefontaine’s classification as an Opportunity Zone. Small Town Properties LLC, a Small Nation Company, established the community’s first Opportunity Zone fund and has invested in filling a need that was identified by the community itself.

It’s About More Than Aesthetics

The development and revitalization of small towns across the country are not just a cosmetic fix. The effort, even if it is a bit of a hustle, is a strategic investment in the economic vibrancy of the town itself and a vital one at that. Downtown areas are the beating heart of a community. When they wither, the rest of the town follows.

With this in mind, the Small Nation team has been able to push forward numerous additions to the downtown streetscape. These additions were strategically designed to not only accent the environment visually, but to improve downtown animation, increase pedestrian traffic and make it easier for visitors to find merchants and navigate through the area.

Working in partnership with the city, the Small Nation team has introduced streetscape improvements that encourage residents and visitors to spend time and dollars while enjoying the outdoors. City leaders were receptive to shifting parking areas to accommodate the addition of outdoor restaurant patios, reversing the direction of alley traffic to allow the addition of drive-through windows and changing the sign ordinance to allow new pedestrian wayfinding signage to be added. This public-private partnership and the willingness of the city to think differently was crucial in not only achieving these improvements, but the speed at which they were accomplished.

SUCCESS REENVISIONS THE PAST

Block by Block

Designed by architect David William Gibbs in 1880, the Opera Block & Empire Block buildings served as an anchor in our community for nearly a century. Encompassing nearly an entire city block, the structure housed many merchants throughout the years who supplied Bellefontaine with everything from groceries and dry goods, to the post office, news stand and furniture.

A Grand Opera house once stood behind the current Opera Block and Empire Block buildings, offering performances by some of the biggest names of the time. The Chicago and Pittsburgh Symphonies once entertained the Bellefontaine community in the Grand Opera House, as well as John Phillip Sousa, Buffalo Bill Cody, Kollar and Herman and Harry Houdini.

The Grand Opera House continued operations for 33 years, closing its doors in 1913. It remained empty for four years until 1917 when it was turned into a movie theater. The Opera House played silent movies until 1930, when Harry Miller converted the theater for sound movies and renamed it the Court Theater. The theater was torn down in 1956, and the block went through many changes following.

Merchants continued serving the community from the building, but the majesty of the structure soon began to lose its luster. Like many historic buildings in small towns, the upper floors were no longer utilized due to the cost of energy and egress improvements, leaving only street level usage. This happens often as a good-intentioned way to save on a building-owner's balance sheet, but the practice has long-term impacts, both on the value of the asset and on the community as a whole.

As the unused upper floors of The Opera Block building remained dark, empty, and out of mind for decades, they began to fall into decline. Roof leaks were not repaired, which led to structural damage on the floors below. In 2019, parts of the building were condemned because of health and safety issues.

Small Nation purchased the Historic Opera & Empire Blocks in 2021 for \$310,000. The three-story, 10 storefront building encompasses over 40,000 square feet, with 20,000 square feet of office space on the second and third floors.

When envisioning the revitalization, the team was strategic about the mix of potential tenants for the street level spaces. Their ultimate goal was to attract a mix of retail, professional services, and creative or "experience" businesses that individually served our community and together, created a destination experience for out of town visitors.

Today, the shops at the Opera Block include a coffee shop, home decor, boutiques, a chocolate and gourmet foods store, a small event venue, and even an axe-throwing destination. One of the upper floors features deluxe office suites supported by the services

at Build Cowork+Space.

The tenant mix at The Opera Block does more than simply fill open spaces. It is designed to animate the street with people from the early morning hours until well after dark. The more people that come downtown to visit this iconic cornerstone of the downtown landscape, the more the other downtown businesses are supported in turn.

Investment in strategic redevelopment helps support the entire community.



The Historic Opera Block, before and after redevelopment.

Successful small town redevelopment takes the best pieces of its history and re-envision them for the public experiences they desire for the future. Forward thinking communities see the gaps that typically take people out of town and fill them with businesses that give people a reason to stay.

The Opera Block is Small Nation's largest development project to date. We look forward to bringing the next generation of merchants to downtown Bellefontaine, and continuing the Opera Block's significant history for another 100 years.

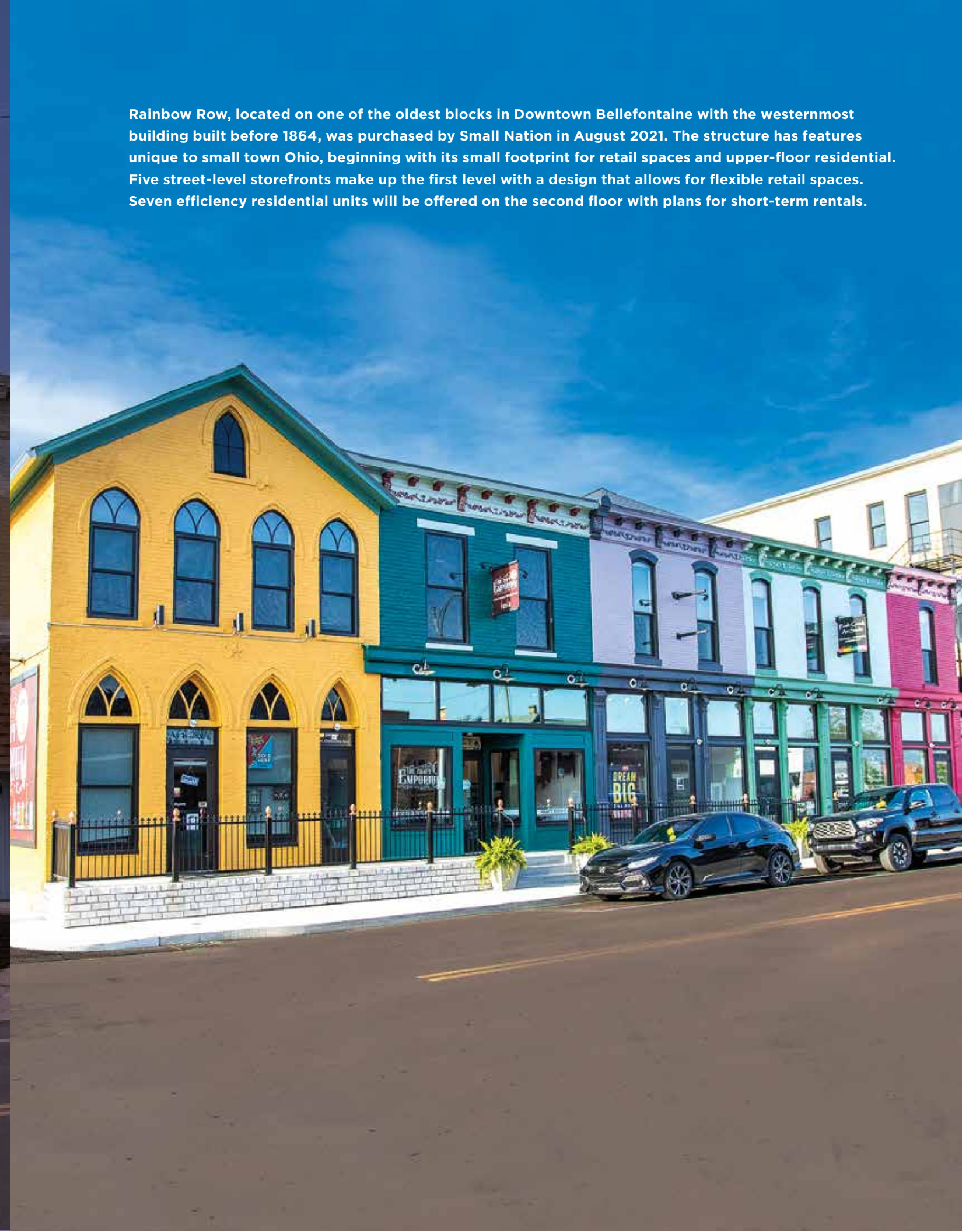


SUCCESS ENERGIZES AREAS



RAINBOW ROW, 114 W. Chillicothe Ave., before and after redevelopment. Learn more at rainbowrowohio.com

Rainbow Row, located on one of the oldest blocks in Downtown Bellefontaine with the westernmost building built before 1864, was purchased by Small Nation in August 2021. The structure has features unique to small town Ohio, beginning with its small footprint for retail spaces and upper-floor residential. Five street-level storefronts make up the first level with a design that allows for flexible retail spaces. Seven efficiency residential units will be offered on the second floor with plans for short-term rentals.





Smart small town building owners, developers, and municipalities should think of redevelopment of their downtown areas as an investment not only in individual properties, but in the sustainability of their towns as a whole.

If done right, this development approach can quite literally reposition a small town in the minds of its citizens as well as visitors. It is an investment in competitiveness, bolstering a community's appeal factor for industry as well as families who are looking to relocate. It has the potential to affect the tax base significantly and gives job seekers a reason to choose your town over the possibilities next door. Designing your community is about so much more than aesthetics. It affects everything.

Today Small Nation's initial purchase and renovation of Main Street Marketplace has grown into \$30M+ in investment, 56+ renovated buildings, and 60+ new businesses, including retail, residential, restaurant, health and wellness, lifestyle, and professional services that provide upwards of 180+ new jobs for the area. These businesses were designed to support one another rather than operating as an island in the way industry might. As a cohesive unit, they function as a tourism draw as well.

In 2023, Ohio Magazine recognized Bellefontaine as one of **Ohio's Best Hometowns**. The magazine's editors chose Bellefontaine for its impressive downtown redevelopment efforts, thriving sense of community and appreciation for preserving local history. Small Nation was also honored by the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission (MORPC) as the **2022 Recipient of the William C. Habig Collaborative Achievement Award**, and smartasset.com recognized Bellefontaine as one of the **15 best small cities in America**.

The advantages of investment in your downtown area are very competitive with traditional economic development practices and support a side of growth that industry simply can not. When combined as a balanced approach to economic growth, the approach is unstoppable.

What began as a single building renovation has turned into a complete overhaul of Bellefontaine's city center. Small Nation's efforts, paired with the close partnership and open minded cooperation of city leadership has allowed the town to transition from a shuttered small town on life support to a vibrant, bustling, state-wide draw in just a few short years. Bellefontaine has officially been resuscitated.



ONE OF THE 15 BEST SMALL CITIES IN AMERICA



OHIO MAGAZINE BEST HOMETOWN 2022



WILLIAM C. HABIG COLLABORATIVE ACHIEVEMENT AWARD 2022

SUCCESS IS A PROVEN FORMULA

Every day, people around the country ask us... HOW did you manage to accomplish so much in so little time? This story illustrates our major accomplishments, but there have been many lessons, twists and turns that happened along the way.

We've distilled our experiences over the past decade into a successful and tested approach that small towns can utilize everywhere to start, revive, grow and thrive. We call it the **Small Town Success™ Formula**, and it can become your blueprint toward revitalization.

The Small Town Success™ Formula works with people as well as places. A holistic, multifaceted approach to small town development, our system guides small towns in identifying existing opportunities that may have been hidden in plain sight for years. Our team's experience and fresh eyes can help you amplify a new vision for your town, create solid strategies for implementing that vision, and develop ways to tell the world.

Based on the five key fundamentals we utilized to revitalize Downtown Bellefontaine, Ohio, **The Small Town Success™ Formula** includes a blend of immersive experiences, one-on-one consulting, financing strategies, design direction, and brand building.

The Small Town Success™ Formula is a comprehensive service and consulting package, including:

- A tour of downtown Bellefontaine
- An insight visit to your town
- A comprehensive downtown assessment
- Community branding
- Redevelopment strategies
 - » Suggestions for effective reuse of historic buildings
 - » Development and attraction of a target tenant mix
 - » Architectural renderings
 - » Communication with the community throughout the growth process

Customizable, a-la-carte service packages that best fit your town's needs are also available.

THE FORMULA FOR SUCCESS

The Small Town Success™ Formula is designed to help your small town learn, grow, and begin a path toward real change. To learn more about how Small Nation can help your town, reach out at 937-565-4580 or send us a note at smallnationstrong.com/success today.

DOWNLOAD OUR LIBRARY

For additional details about Small Nation's many success stories in downtown Bellefontaine, visit our website at:

smallnationstrong.com/success



Bella Vino Events



Brewfontaine



City Sweets & Creamery



Hickory Direct Medical



Lofts 110



The Syndicate



Nest 1896



Olde Mint Antiques



The Flying Pepper



Six Hundred Downtown



Main Street Marketplace



Anytime Fitness/Loco Depot

SMALL NATION develops places, spaces and dreams for small towns and small town entrepreneurs across the country.

**SMALL
NATION**

We're here to show the world that small town and small business success is not only possible, but profitable. For everyone.

www.smallnationstrong.com