

Episode 14

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Gahanna Ohio economic development, authenticity and sense of place, downtown redevelopment, Creekside district, historic preservation, adaptive reuse, historic tax credits, low-income housing tax credits, Brew House artist lofts, access to capital, small business support, planning versus transacting, Licking County, Intel and repeated success, telling your community story

SPEAKERS

Jason Duff, Nate Strum, Ethan DeLeon

J Jason Duff 00:00
One of the greatest things that you can do is get out of the bubble in your local community and go explore. Ask questions, take pictures, bring those insights and that knowledge back to people in your town.

N Nate Strum 00:13
If you think that your town don't stink, then you're missing out on a lot of other great towns.

E Ethan DeLeon 00:26
Hey everyone, my name is Ethan DeLeon and I'm here with our founder and CEO of Small Nation, Jason Duff. On today's episode, we are honored to have the director of economic development for the city of Gahanna, Nate Strum, joining us. We want to welcome you to the Small Nation podcast where we share some of the valuable lessons with what we have learned about entrepreneurship, real estate, economic development, and more. The point of this podcast is to create value for you, the listener, and to create a space to learn, talk about what's trending, and inspire others.

J Jason Duff 00:51
Nate, welcome to the podcast.

N Nate Strum 00:54
Thank you for having me. I'm so excited to be here in Bellefontaine.

J Jason Duff 00:56
Yeah, it's awesome. So I have been stalking Nate online for several years now. You know, unfortunately, LinkedIn is his, like, his LinkedIn game is really strong. I wish he was on more social media tools so I could stalk him better. But he is a force when it comes to positivity, local, you know, shopping, jobs, manufacturing, economic development is a language that he speaks. And the other thing about— I appreciate about Nate, he makes economic development fun.

N**Nate Strum** 01:24

Thanks, buddy. I love it. I mean, I think economic development at its core is all about local focus. How do you impact lives? How do you impact local businesses? How do you make a community thrive? And if you have a successful implemented economic development strategy, those all things come together naturally.

J**Jason Duff** 01:41

When you were in kindergarten, did you kind of like say to your teacher, I want to be an economic development professional?

N**Nate Strum** 01:47

No. I did panhandle my neighbors though as my initial fundraising efforts. So I mean—

J**Jason Duff** 01:52

That's a good start. What kind of things were you selling to them?

N**Nate Strum** 01:56

Candy, poverty, things of that nature. I tell a story, I'll high-level it. I'm the middle child, just had my baby sister. This is probably 1988. My mom's freaking out, my older sister's very needy, I'm not, baby's crying. I hop on a three-wheeler and hit my neighbors and I go, excuse me. My family says we're poor and we can't go on vacation this summer. I wanna go to Sesame Street Land. Will you donate to our Sesame Street Land fund? And I got like \$20 after an hour. Now, they got 1988 standards. I'm rolling deep. I should be on the back of a milk carton somewhere, but I'm not. My mom realizes I'm missing. One of my neighbors goes, hey, Karen, Natey's missing. I just gave him a dollar and he's going to the next door neighbor's house. My mom comes out screaming. None of the neighbors take the money back. I put on top of the fridge for 6 months. We go to the Red Kettle campaign, and in December I cry while I lose my money for vacation into the tub.

J**Jason Duff** 02:55

Did you get to ring the bell?

N**Nate Strum** 02:56

No. Oh, that was the punishment. Like, it was really bad. Um, I do stand-up on the weekend, so these stories and more are reasons why my mom drinks from the 1980s.

J**Jason Duff** 03:06

See, I told you this would be fun. No, tell, tell us about where you grew up.

N**Nate Strum** 03:10

Sure. So grew up in Pittsburgh. Right, wrong, or different, if you're a Cleveland fan, I'm sorry. It's been a rough couple decades for you. If you're a Pittsburgher, yes, I'm cheating on you in Ohio. It's fine.

J**Jason Duff** 03:20

All right.

N**Nate Strum** 03:20

No, so grew up in Pittsburgh, uh, went to a small liberal arts college called Muskegon College, now known as University. Uh, met the love of my life, uh, Christy, there. Um, first job was in Zanesville working as a city planner. I always joke from that point forward I'm a reform planner. Uh, so I got in economic development after that, moved back to Pittsburgh where I either won or lost that lottery, and, uh, came back to Ohio back in '15, and I've been running it since. It's been a great ride.

J**Jason Duff** 03:47

Well, you know, you've seen a lot of different communities and places that you live, and, um, what to you are, are some of the most important things that really matter when picking a new community?

N**Nate Strum** 03:57

Authenticity. What I really look for, either when working with a community to help kind of reenergize them, or even working for a community, is I want it to be authentic. I want it to be something that I can relate to, that I can see myself in, that I can see myself working to bring new energy to. If I don't see it, it's just not, it's not going to work. I've oftentimes said even in my prior role with Grow Licking County here in Central Ohio and then certainly in Gahanna where I am today, they have authenticity in spades. Gahanna in particular with the Creekside area, the level of parks and recreational opportunities with the same small town atmosphere, local restaurant vibe, scenery. It's somewhere you can really raise a family and really see yourself being in for a number of years. In grow looking county and working with those communities, I always said that those communities had authenticity in spades, whether you were in Utica for the ice cream festival in June or the Heath Star-Spangled Banner activities or the power show in Pataskala or everything in between. It was always somewhere you can go find something on that weekend and identify to. And that's what's really important in economic development because you got to be able to share that story. With businesses and community members so they can see that community moving forward.

J**Jason Duff** 05:09

When you were in college at Muscatine, it was college at the time, but now it's a university today. What drew you to a small-town university?

N**Nate Strum** 05:19

Making an impact. So my mom always told me, you know, when I was looking at colleges, do I want to be a big fish in a small pond or do I want to be a small fish or big fish in— yeah, big fish in a small pond or small fish in a big pond. And it just so happened that Muskingum, uh, mascot was a fish.

J**Jason Duff** 05:37

Uh, is that literally— it's actually— it's a muskie. Tell us, what is a muskie?

N**Nate Strum** 05:43

Like, what kind of ugly, ugly fish?

J**Jason Duff** 05:45

But that's scary.

N**Nate Strum** 05:46

And, and no, no, just fat with big teeth, easy to catch, very stupid. Um, it's fine.

J**Jason Duff** 05:56

Do you still like— like, you wear Proud as a shirt? I do.

N**Nate Strum** 05:58

I am a proud, proud muskie. I'm actually a Muskie Bobcat. I finished my master's at OU just a couple years a few years ago. But I love my time at Muskingum, and, and the reason I chose Muskingum really was I want to be someplace where I can make an impact. I want to get my hands dirty. I wanted to figure out who I was. And, you know, I was, I was already dedicated. I was gonna— I was like, I'm going to Penn State. I'm gonna go to Penn State. I'm going to Pitt. I'm gonna go someplace big, get that experience. Then I actually— my mom forced me to go to Muskingum on a Saturday to visit the campus and just see it. Just see it. They had sent me some information. Stepped onto the quad and I was like, this is it. This is the experience I was looking for.

J**Jason Duff** 06:35

You know, walking and doing a tour, you know, whether you're going to a town for the first time or a university, what are the things that you find most important for a town to put its best foot forward?

N**Nate Strum** 06:47

Uh, A, people. Yeah, you don't want to go someplace where you're not seeing people or activities, personalities. Um, but also like just what your character is. Like, what I love about even coming here last night, so the first thing I photographed was the fountain outside of the courthouse on top of the pineapple. I think the pineapple identity here in this town is hysterical. At Muskingum, it was the beauty of the quad. It's those iconographic moments in your community. In Gahanna, it's the creek. It's the area of the parklands and those pathways and those areas. If you go back, like I said, when I was at Licking County, it was the courthouse in downtown Newark on the square. It was Buckeye Lake. It was going up to the old mill in Utica. You have those moments and you have those things that can certainly identify where you are in time. And those are the lasting impressions that you want to make, whether you're a student looking at a university, a business coming to your community, or someone looking to relocate. Those are those moments that they're always looking to identify.

J**Jason Duff** 07:49

You know, history and historic preservation is, you know, of course a movement around the country, but some folks that can just sound very big and intimidating, like how are we going to, you know, save this really old theater, or how are we going to save all of these buildings that, that do mean a lot, but that just takes a lot of money. Sometimes it's just starting out really small. The details of architecture and art are peppered all throughout our towns. Sometimes they're really unassuming but very big and significant.

N**Nate Strum** 08:16

It's always about that intentional choice too. Um, so if you're redeveloping a block, you know, the goal is to save as much as you can, however you can. But even if you can't save something, it's about being intentional about backfilling what that aesthetic is and making sure that it fits the, the overall aesthetic of that block or that neighborhood and making sure you're honoring the past. I love when you see public art, whether it's the fountains or the wall paintings. I think there's a, there's a, a banner-ish painting on the wall over here in one of your buildings. Yep. Right here on the main drag. I love that stuff. Yeah, um, because again, it honors your history while still making you give space and sense of place.

J**Jason Duff** 08:52

So you call yourself— I want to make sure I say it correctly— you were a planner, but now you're—

N**Nate Strum** 08:57

I'm a reformed planner now in economic development.

J**Jason Duff** 09:00

So there is sometimes these, um, barriers, or, or maybe you call like groups of thinking that, um, around planning and zoning, you know, trying to restrict, um, and, and Can you speak a little bit to, you know, because you've had kind of both of those hats, how you respect the planning process and why that's important, but how that can work with economic development?

N**Nate Strum** 09:23

Sure. And so, and I remind even my counterpart, my good friend Michael Blackford in the city of Gahanna regularly, and we have conversations all the time. You know, there's one great thing to be in a plan and to be mindful of what the community's looking for, but there's another side of this about being transactional. You can't just live in a bubble and have this master plan concept without being able to transact against it, because otherwise it's just going to sit on the shelf, collect dust, and you're going to move your community forward regardless.

J**Jason Duff** 09:50

And so about—

N**Nate Strum** 09:50

it's about being mindful, it's about moving at the speed of business. That can be very cliché at times, but I take it very purposeful. And so being able to understand timing, understanding workforce, understand, and then, and then backing that into a reasonable, articulated, digestible schedule. So that a project can happen, not just maybe happen, and then get to that transaction moment. I was sharing with the team earlier, you know, we're looking through a large-scale redevelopment of a portion of Gahanna right now, and we've partnered with some really phenomenal partners. Lori Bongiorno and her team from M&A have been phenomenal to work with. But I reminded them every step of the way as we're working through this revitalization plan, guys, at the end of this project, we need to transact.

J**Jason Duff** 10:31

Gotta accomplish something.

N**Nate Strum** 10:32

We have to do something. It just can't be something that aesthetically is pleasing to everybody. Yeah. And then it's going to sit on a shelf. So I oftentimes think with the end in mind when doing a project like that. You know, I want to be mindful of public art, I want to be mindful of the existing infrastructure and the needs that are going to happen to it, but I also make sure that we catalyze the project to a degree that necessitates the public art, that necessitates the infrastructure improvements. Not just planning for them, but I got to make something happen that helps catalyze and bring additional dollars into the project just to make those things happen.

J**Jason Duff** 11:06

Um, I don't know if— have we talked about the historic Opera Block here in Bellefontaine at all on the podcast? Well, no, I'm happy to bring it up. Like, we embarked on a pretty large project here in the downtown. That building, you know, was built back in the 1880s. It's one of the oldest structures in our town, 40,000 square feet, 13 storefronts. Um, it— the city condemned it about 2 years ago, the second and third floor, because it just was not being maintained and very serious issues with the roof and kind of the kind of things that were happening in the building. Sure. And so we applaud the courage of that. But then, you know, we've been undergoing a planning effort, a planning effort to really visualize how do you respect the historic character of the building, but how do we make it valuable for what the needs of the community are today. So like, you walk by it, you'll see, um, that there is renovations to tuckpoint all the brick, um, the roof has been restored, and now, uh, there are retail stores that are announcing their, their opening. So in the next 2 months. There's 2 new retail vintage local stores. There's a pottery and chocolate store. There'll be another restaurant concept. But it did take in the beginning working with code officials to, you know, make sure that we're preserving and protecting the structure. But I would also say that the practicality of meeting the Secretary of Interior's standards to preserve everything, every detail perfectly, uh, to those standards, it's not practical or portable.

N**Nate Strum** 12:35

I would say back in, in when I was in the Pittsburgh area, one of my favorite projects I ever worked on was a restoration of the Duquesne Brewery building in downtown Pittsburgh, around the South Side, if you're familiar with South Side of the city at all. This was a 107,000 square foot brewery building. It had fallen into disrepair. Artists had taken it over, which I love the artist community in Pittsburgh, don't get me wrong. So the Brew House Association was formed I was brought on board to help them transact. So going back to the earlier point, and then we brought on a developer. And to your point, Jason, we started looking through the historic tax credit programming and the layers that come into that program are, you know, on face value, you're like, oh, we can do this. In reality, the level of detail and the level of precision necessary to qualify for that 20% return, it's just not feasible. Oftentimes you see a lot of folks going more to the state historic levels just to get the 10 or 15, depending on where you are. And then matching that with like a LIHTC program, low-income housing tax credit, or some other catalyzing funding source. So in the case of the Brew House, we used— we were actually the largest allocation of low-income housing tax credit programming that cycle in Pennsylvania. And what that did was allowed us to create 45 live-work lofts for artists.

J**Jason Duff** 13:51

There you go.

N**Nate Strum** 13:53

Who were there, balanced with market-rate housing in the building as well. And then we created incubator space so they could do their business planning. The goal was to get artists into the building, get them up, get them stable, get them trained on the business side of retail art, what it meant, uh, have gallery space so they can show their wares and do their thing, and then graduate out of the building.

J**Jason Duff** 14:15

I love that.

N**Nate Strum** 14:15

And then they can rinse and repeat. And it's actually now in their 6th or 7th iteration of cohorts that are coming through the building now. It's a great model. Brew House Association, if you get a chance to look at it online, it's a wonderful project.

J**Jason Duff** 14:27

Yeah, that's great. I'll have to check that out. What do you find, like, in talking and working with small business owners, what are the kind of things that they come to you that they need?

N**Nate Strum** 14:35

Oh, capital. Access to capital. In this marketplace today and with rising interest rates, what's happening, I think every business in general is struggling with getting their arms around the dreaded word of inflation and what's happening right now in the marketplace. But in reality, small businesses are in such a unique position because they have the constraints of a large business in many degrees, but the margins of an exceptionally small business, oftentimes being run by family or multigenerational families. And so they're trying to balance those needs. So access to capital and access to reliable labor are typically the two biggest things that we hear almost on a regular basis. And then you get into the supply chains and working with trying to sync up their suppliers or bringing in folks that they can help supply product with, whether it's engravers or— seamstresses and, and graphic designers and things like that, trying to find people that they can partner with to have like long-term accounts so they can have some type of balance to them while chasing new business. It's always complicated in that space. We've had really great relationships in Kahana with our friends at Heartland Bank, who's a community-based bank in our marketplace. Obviously Huntington's a very big player where we are as well, given their SBA position. But it's about building those— to me, it's always about building relationships, whether it's in, in those constraints or economic development in general. And so I always tell our small businesses, what's your relationship with your banker? And if you haven't talked to them in 6 months or a year, that's probably 6 months or a year too long since you've had that conversation.

J**Jason Duff** 16:01

Great point. So relationships really are in, in life and in business one of the most important currencies that you can have. You know, in a community you have different groups of people. You have folks that work in city government, you have folks at Chamber Tourism, you have different groups of, of constituencies, constituencies, whether it's the Arts Council or the Tree Commission. How do you look at bringing and bridging those groups to be on the same team?

N**Nate Strum** 16:33

That's a great question, and it's something that I think every economic developer is challenged with because The dynamics of each of those organizations are very different.

J**Jason Duff** 16:41

Are very different.

N

Nate Strum 16:41

Personalities too, right? Personalities, dynamics, and ultimate goals. Yeah. And so it's trying to find that commonality. Where's the common ground that we can operate in? So if I'm talking to the Tree Commission, for example, and I'm talking about doing a very large-scale redevelopment, and they want X number of green space, OK. What are you really digging on here? What are we really looking for? What's the real impact you're searching for in these spaces? Um, just like when I talk to historical commissions, okay, great, I want to preserve too. What are you really looking for? Like, because I can— we can do some preservation work in here. We can also honor some facades. We can also do some public art. We can do some installations. We can do, um, some placards and, and acknowledgments of what, what the history of these spaces were. What are you really looking for here? And so trying to find those common ground moments, and they can be few and fleeting at times.. But being mindful of those and also understanding what that— you can't just be a bull in the china shop every time.

J

Jason Duff 17:37

What do you do if someone is? Oh, I know it's hard because— but I hear that a lot. Like, there are people that have a great voice, but just because there's one group or one person in the community that, you know, sometimes it's just loud and honestly maybe sending a message that's not accurate. Like, how do you overcome that?

N

Nate Strum 17:53

So I've done that actually, and, and, you know, I call it the come to Jesus meeting. And we go behind closed doors. And we have some reality checks here. One of the conversations I've had in my career, and this is back in the Pittsburgh days, was really with a local planning guy. He was on the planning commission. He had a vision for what the Cary Furnace project needed to be. This was my big project back in the day. And everything we brought forward, no. And he would rally the community behind it every time. And now, mind you, you got to remember, This project spanned 5 communities in one of the lowest income areas of Allegheny County. 168 acres, both sides of the Monongahela River, anchored by a historically significant blast furnace preservation space. So they have 2 furnaces on it. Go look at it online. It's beautiful today. It's amazing the work they're doing over there. But back in 2009, there's weeds, there's rampant drug use on the side. It is rough. And I'm like, guys, we've got to transact. And but it wasn't, it wasn't what they envisioned. And I finally sat them down. I said, listen, I'm all about compromise. What do you want? Now, I didn't say it this way. I said a little more, you know, crass and a little more direct. To be perfectly honest, you got to have a real moment, my friend. Yeah. And, and basically said, the way you're going right now, nothing will happen on this site and when nothing happens on this site, it's not going to be my fault, it's not going to be the Redevelopment Authority's fault, it's not going to be the county's fault as a whole. I will point it squarely at you, and I will show anyone who asks the level of content— contempt and the level of discourse that you have created to service you, because you I wanna be the architect. You wanna be the vision. And because you have a sliver of influence in the process, you are holding everything up. That shook him.

J**Jason Duff** 19:59

Because again, you need those real moments though where it's like, you know, you're— and people complain. It's easy to complain and say, well, they should be doing this. They should be doing that. But when it comes down to it, there's probably no capital being put to solving that solution, and it's just being resistance to seeing anything get done.

N**Nate Strum** 20:15

Well, and again, when dealing with small towns— so this town, um, although Allegheny County and Pittsburgh's 100, a couple hundred thousand people, county is a million plus— this community is 8,000 people, right? So you're dealing with that still small town dynamics. He's the big fish in that small town, but when you step out of that boundary, he's nothing, right? So you just gotta re-level set those expectations sometimes too. And it hurts. It's an ego check for all. But if you really are committed to affecting change, if you really are committed to improving people's lives, creating opportunities, and moving your community forward, then you need to take a step back sometimes as an individual, realize what those overarching goals are, and get in line.

J**Jason Duff** 21:04

I, I completely agree. And you know, something else, Nate, that I respect about you and, and I've enjoyed getting to know you better, and, and also the communities that you've worked in and are working in. One of the best ways that I have grown professionally is traveling somewhere else and interviewing them, asking questions, and learning about what makes their town unique and special. Um, you know, you mentioned, you know, Licking County, and just going and watching what's happened in Newark in the last— oh yeah, you know, 15 years, it's emulated a really great model of success for redevelopment. And when companies— and we're going to talk about the, the really big news and announcement for Ohio has come up a number of times on the podcast. But if you're going to try to recruit the Intels of the world, it is going to be the amenities, the quality experience that the community itself, what that has to offer. And Newark's a great example.

N**Nate Strum** 21:58

It is. And actually, I'll go one step further than that, Jason, because it also takes repetitive success. You can't just think that you, as a community, you're going to create something in a bubble. Yeah. Right? So Intel comes because in, in New Albany in particular, because not only has New Albany had repeated success, but Johnstown just to the north has shown repeated success and investment.

J**Jason Duff** 22:23

I just went to Ghostwriter.

N**Nate Strum** 22:24

Oh, Ghostwriter's an amazing restaurant.

J

Jason Duff 22:26

Oh my gosh. Guys, if you have not, if you're looking for a day trip kind of experience.

N

Nate Strum 22:30

I'm having a food moment here.

J

Jason Duff 22:31

Well, I just say, let's, let's do that. Johnstown Eastown, Ohio, population today, would you say?

N

Nate Strum 22:37

It's just over 5,000 people.

J

Jason Duff 22:38

Just over 5,000. But you pull into town and it has a very picturesque downtown, but there you pull up and there's this restaurant that I think it would be the nicest restaurant in any large city that you've ever seen. Whether it's the signage, the vibes, the energy, you open up the door and it's like the cocktails are flowing, there's this beautiful curated menu. It's a magical small town experience.

N

Nate Strum 23:02

And mind you, I'm a coffee snob. They have the best French press coffee I've ever had.

J

Jason Duff 23:07

Now you have my attention.

N

Nate Strum 23:09

Oh my God. But like, you have that, you have the old Horseshoe Tavern right next door too. So you have these character moments in their downtown, but they've had rapid success too. So they've seen Tech International, which is headquartered right there in Johnstown, success. Um, they've seen work through Blechman in their community, success. You step out a little bit farther again, so going back to Utica, you've seen multiple expansions at Velvet Ice Cream, success. Newark has seen expansion projects with Kroger, Longevity with Licking Memorial Health Systems, Boeing's in that marketplace down in the Heath market, they've expanded, success. There's been 8 or 9 different food-based expansions in Licking County, success in the manufacturing space. Amazon Web Services, Facebook, all located in Licking County. Success. So Intel has a certain level of confidence that, hey, we're going to pull the trigger here.

J

Jason Duff 24:02

Yeah.

N**Nate Strum** 24:03

We know we can do this, A, because Central Ohio is a great area to be in, but B, where we're going, we have seen 30, 40, 50 examples of success. And so that goes back to one of your earlier points, Jason, is about, it's also about telling your own story, right? So to be a successful community, you need to have great people, got great character, great authenticity, but you got to also be able to tell who you are, right, to the broader public. No one's going to tell your story for you. And so being able to show that level of improvement over time and the cascading effect it could have in your community— so the downtown improvement in Newark and the places around the square has taken a yeoman's effort by the city administration, Newark Development Partners, um, those collaborative entities have worked so hard to do that, but it also shows, you know, the growing population, the growing interest, the growing investments that have been able to be capitalized in that community.

J**Jason Duff** 24:57

Well, and I think that's something that you should be really proud of as you kind of think back. You know, Grow Licking County has had an incredible reputation for the planning and for the marketing and efforts, and obviously because they've repeated that, there's people behind the scenes that have been working hard to do that. So just a big shout out with that. Let's talk about Gahanna.

N**Nate Strum** 25:15

Oh, I love Gahanna.

J**Jason Duff** 25:16

Well, you know, that had to be a tough decision to— It was. It was with all the momentum and energy, like — Give us a quick snapshot of population, industry in Gahanna.

N**Nate Strum** 25:26

Sure. So population is just around 35,000, predominantly bedroom community. We see a lot of cycle out into the med and ed areas of Ohio State, the hospital systems, et cetera. Major industries in our marketplace, Donato's is headquartered, in Gahanna. So heavy in the food, area, R&D.

J**Jason Duff** 25:45

Did they give you unlimited pizza?

N**Nate Strum** 25:47

What?

J**Jason Duff** 25:47

Not yet.

N**Nate Strum** 25:48

I mean, I talk to Craig and the Gordy family all the time. They haven't opted into that moment as of yet, but maybe. Next up on the podcast.

J**Jason Duff** 25:56

Yeah.

N**Nate Strum** 25:57

If you guys are listening, I prefer the Founders. It's a—

J**Jason Duff** 26:02

That is a good pizza.

N**Nate Strum** 26:02

It's a great pizza. So food, aerospace. So we— one of our big projects last year was working with ADB SafeGate on their headquarters, North American headquarters R&D facility. Um, but really, again, it's small town charm stuff. So I love working with our local breweries, I love working with local distilleries, um, because those are things that drive activities and people's interest in your community beyond. Um, but it's just, it's a well-balanced area of some older industrial balanced with a lot of new tech in those spaces. And then we have a flourishing, uh, modern medical campus that's happening right now by the airport.

J**Jason Duff** 26:35

And just like, what, 15 minutes outside of Columbus? Not even. Not even.

N**Nate Strum** 26:39

10 minutes. Right off the highway, we're right— our Mill Street area where our Creekside area district is, it's basically at the end of 670. So you hop on 670, you're downtown in less than 5.

J**Jason Duff** 26:49

Yeah. So think about this. Easton Town Center, yep, you know, was built, let's say, 30-plus years ago as a brand new downtown area. So it kind of— the architects and designers really thought about how do we, you know, innovate malls and create this town center concept in Columbus, Ohio. And Easton really has been a development model that's used a lot of other, you know, states around, around the country. You are how close to Easton?

N**Nate Strum** 27:17

Less than 50-minute drive. 15-minute drive.

J**Jason Duff** 27:19

15 minutes. So, you know, part of it is, how do you, as you think about Kahana, what are ways that we differentiate what Kahana has? Because there's a lot of things about Easton, you know, that I like, um, but, you know, there is a lot of things like every place has a Macy's, every place has a Gap, like people wanting— like you mentioned, like, that you care about, and I know I care about, a lot of our listeners care about— they want something authentic.

N**Nate Strum** 27:43

That's exactly what I say, and that's really the driver. So we recently started going through— I mentioned earlier the M&A study with Lori and her team— and at the end of it, I was like, I really want to get some data about what the community wants in here, because again, we're 15 minutes from this huge commercial retail epicenter in, in Central Ohio, and I don't want to duplicate efforts. And so when you start actually seeing the results, it's about having a local wine shop, it's about a local bakery, it's about a cheese house, it's about food halls, it's about authentic experiences that people can take their children to and families can congregate at, and they can just enjoy themselves with no pressures and no, no pushes. Um, one of my favorite spots in, in the Creekside area, for example, is Signatures. Now, mind you, this is historically just neighborhood bar. This is a— this is your downtown bar. It's single story, no frills, great cocktails. They shut down during COVID and Kenny McDonald, head of the partnership, is calling me on a weekly basis because he drives that way to go home, and Signatures is closed, and it's my fault.

J**Jason Duff** 28:52

I wouldn't want that phone call. First off, you know, Kenny is a pretty prominent and important person in economic development in our state.

N**Nate Strum** 28:59

And I've only been there 3 weeks. I'm like, Kenny, I'm talking to the owners. It's COVID, buddy. He's like, Nate, I want my popcorn and I want my cocktails.

J**Jason Duff** 29:10

I love that.

N**Nate Strum** 29:10

Get them back open.

J**Jason Duff** 29:11

That's passion though.

N**Nate Strum** 29:12

It was. And, but that's the thing, like, and I think every community has that spot where everyone's, whether you live there or not, you're like, that's the place I want to go. That's, that's my spot. That's where I identify.

J**Jason Duff** 29:22

Right.

N**Nate Strum** 29:23

Yeah. Um, I go up to Edison Brewing Company. So if you haven't been to Edison Brewing Company, Edison, is at Franklin Peak. So it's the highest mount— highest peak in Franklin County. It's in our industrial area, but you wouldn't know it being there. It's right next to—

J**Jason Duff** 29:35

are you going to let them know that you are in Bellefontaine, the highest point?

N**Nate Strum** 29:38

I'm not. I'm not highlighting that point. I mean, someone else just highlighted that point, and I'll be going again. And, and just for consistency purposes, I'm going to partake in the local brewery after this podcast. Gotta try it out here, the highest point in Ohio. Yeah, you could see if it tastes different. Different. I just gotta understand that. Research. Yeah, exactly. Uh, but going there, I mean, that's my spot. And every Tuesday is our trivia night, and I'm there on the weekends hanging out because you oversee a 9-hole golf course. There's a driving range, which is all lovely, but you're at the backside of the airport and you're watching the planes come in above. And then you have unfiltered views of downtown at night, of downtown Columbus. And it is just absolutely stunning. So if you get a chance, I mean, those are those iconography moments in your community, but also those small town charm moments. So like, I knew the bartenders within probably a week of going there regularly, because just chat them up, you talk them, you talk to them. And now that's my spot. And so I, I will do anything I can to help my spot now. Um, and I, and candidly, as an account developer, every one of my businesses is my spot. I own that. Uh, I want to own the relationship. I'm not going to have the solution every time, But I want to be the person that they think of to call, so I'm the last person they, they get wrong before they get the right person they're looking for. That's how I always look at my job.

J**Jason Duff** 30:58

I love that.

N**Nate Strum** 30:59

I'm not the right person, but I'll get you to that person next.

J**Jason Duff** 31:02

Yeah, great perspective. So what brings you to Bellefontaine?

N**Nate Strum** 31:05

Food. Good choice. I mean, honestly, I was here back with the, with Mode and One Columbus team a few weeks ago, and I was just, I love the downtown, and I love visiting small towns, to Jason's earlier point, I want to find out what makes you guys tick up here a little bit. I want to get that sense of charm. I want to understand why people want to come up here and visit. I want to take some of that, that Bellefontaines-ness back to Gahanna. Yep. Um, earlier today I was out at Wapakoneta. Loved walking out.

J**Jason Duff** 31:34

Another great downtown.

N**Nate Strum** 31:35

Great downtown.

J**Jason Duff** 31:36

Yeah.

N**Nate Strum** 31:36

And so I want to take some of that, that Wap, Koneta, kinetic energy back down to, uh, Gahanna.

J**Jason Duff** 31:43

There you go.

N**Nate Strum** 31:43

Exactly.

J**Jason Duff** 31:44

Someone from Wapak better listen to that. Yeah. So what, what is it? What, what do you see in Bellefontaine that can be brought to like a bigger city? I don't, I don't wanna say a bigger city like a Hannah, but you know what I mean?

N**Nate Strum** 31:54

Sure. No, I get it. Well, I, I love the density. So for being a city the size of Bellefontaine in Logan County, you wouldn't have expected to have such a great downtown density, walkability. Yeah. Uh, the first thing I wanna rip off of you, Jason, is your signs.

J**Jason Duff** 32:09

Okay. The wayfinding signs.

N**Nate Strum** 32:10

The wayfinding signs are super —

J **Jason Duff** 32:11
every town needs that.

N **Nate Strum** 32:12
They need it.

J **Jason Duff** 32:13
But, you know, can I tell you from your planning background, we, uh, and I struggled with this when I first started here, and a lot of other towns are struggling with it too, is when they go to their zoning and their sign code, those signs, the wayfinding signs, by definition, because they have color, because they have a logo, because they have an arrow, people deem those as outdoor advertising, which in most towns and communities that is restricted in the sign code. But you understand, if you're a, if you're a side business or a business on a side street You do not have the visibility, the traffic.

N **Nate Strum** 32:44
Exactly right.

J **Jason Duff** 32:44
And I think what I recognized when I saw them, and I'll tell you, I ripped them from traveling to Napa, California.

N **Nate Strum** 32:51
Oh, sure.

J **Jason Duff** 32:51
Which is a great place to do research into wine. Oh, no doubt. You know, you're enjoying the local scenery. You want to know where the wine and cheese shop is and you want to know where that stuff is. And so I, you know, reached out. I learned more about their program and we ripped and duplicated it. But in the beginning, I had to do a test experiment because no one would allow me to do them. Sure.

N **Nate Strum** 33:16
Well, and I have all the confidence in the world that I will get pushback from my good friend Mr. Blackford.

J **Jason Duff** 33:20
Yep.

N**Nate Strum** 33:21

Uh, only because of— to that, to that letter of the law. My goal, and I always, I always challenge Michael on this, is we can operate in the, the micro or we can think in the macro. I want to get you up here. Let's — the, the, the— if we think with the end in mind, so the end in mind is to make sure that our users who are coming into our downtown can figure out where they want to go and what they want to experience, right? If we can think that that's effective use of people movements and downtown growth, how do we implement that at the zoning code level, regardless of what they look like aesthetically, so that we are creating a meaningful impact that supports the continued growth of our community? But I'm ripping that. So, and by the way, Gahanna is the herb capital of the world.

J**Jason Duff** 34:05

That's right.

N**Nate Strum** 34:06

So I don't know what I'm going to put from an iconography standpoint on that thing yet. I would suggest some ideas. I have no doubts. I've had those suggestions made to me. But fun fact, the largest herb in the world is the banana. So if you can say banana, you can say Gahanna.

J**Jason Duff** 34:26

Do you know that is a t-shirt? I like that. I went to college with a girl—

N**Nate Strum** 34:31

that's our pineapple—

J**Jason Duff** 34:32

whose name— I like it, I like it actually— her name was Hannah and she lived in Kahana.

N**Nate Strum** 34:38

Oh, that's a bad thing for her. Poor Hannah.

J**Jason Duff** 34:41

Yeah, Hannah Banana Kahana.

N**Nate Strum** 34:44

Yeah, yeah, good honor.

J**Jason Duff** 34:46

Well, you know, so the wayfinding signs, um, the other thing that we hear a lot of feedback on is how much specialty retail there is. Yeah. And, and how important specialty retail, you know, on our, our main streets, whether it's the shops, the boutiques, and then, you know, just like we're really proud of our kids toy store, The Fun Company.

N

Nate Strum 35:03

Oh, okay. So, you know, when I was here last time, 6 weeks ago, we were doing the walking tour. So I don't know if, um, Nick, bless his soul, he's walking me around and I'm like this kid in the candy store. I'm having ectorgasms all over your town. Uh, really?

J

Jason Duff 35:17

Which, okay, that's a term. I, I was gonna jot this down. So you called it what again?

N

Nate Strum 35:20

An ektavgasm.

J

Jason Duff 35:22

Which is economic development and orgasm together?

N

Nate Strum 35:24

Um, you can say that last word. I'm just gonna assume that that's what that means.

J

Jason Duff 35:28

I love it. Okay. Okay. We're gonna coin that, by the way.

N

Nate Strum 35:31

So I'm shiny. I'm so shiny right now. I'm a small kid in a candy store. And Nick just goes, and here's our toys, our independent toy store. I said, oh, we're stopping. He's like, well, we don't have time. I said, I don't care. We are stopping in here. And I'm gonna check this out.

J

Jason Duff 35:47

Yeah.

N

Nate Strum 35:48

And, and I went in there and he's like, Nate, you got like 5 minutes. And I said, that's fine, I'm spending money. And sure enough, I went to the back side and, and I found— my wife's a big board gamer. I found a couple board games that she's been looking for. I was like, these are coming home with me. Um, and that's what— but that's what you look for in downtown, right? Yeah. Like, to be a vibrant downtown, you want that cross traffic, you want that, oh, I gotta stop there for this and I gotta do there for that. Kind of thing. Toy stores. I think antique stores, if they're done right— yes, it can really do— not a junk thrift store, but curated booths where it's clean, clean-themed, and people can define what they're looking for in that space pretty quickly. And you'll know where that activity is gonna lend in.

J

Jason Duff 36:36

How do you encourage that to happen?

N**Nate Strum** 36:38

You recruit. Yeah, like, like any other business. So we talk regularly about how do we recruit economic-based businesses to support our communities. Yeah, you need just as much energy, if not more, to find those special small businesses or the people who are as passionate in those spaces to create small businesses and then enabling them to happen in your community so that you can have those moments.

J**Jason Duff** 36:58

Where do you start with that? I mean, either you can speak to this when recruiting smaller businesses. Well, I mean, I think part of it is finding people that feel unappreciated and underappreciated. So there's a lot of businesses in town towns that, you know, aren't supported by their locals, or they're, um, you know, stuck, or they have a bad landlord that, you know, isn't maintaining their property. And I think it's just being available to know that you can be a resource to reduce speed bumps for them for if they do want to make a change or a move. But then secondly, I also think it's finding businesses that are already successful in one town and maybe are ready to take that next step to open up a second location. You know, here in Bellefontaine today, you know, I look at examples like Dash and Joey's. You know, it's a fresh-squeezed juice bar in the Anytime Fitness community gym that we have in the downtown. You know, they started in Lima, second location is Walpark, third location is here. They're getting ready to announce their fourth location. That's an example of a business that has reached scale, and there are other entrepreneurs and, and businesses that whether they're licensing their business and licensing their logo, their menu, their, their systems and process, or another word is a franchise. And, uh, there's some great Ohio-based franchises. I mean, I, going over, you know, your way in, in Granville, you know, I, I love the Whitmans that have started Witt's Frozen Custard. And I think that's an example. I think there's like 20 or so Witts that are everywhere. Yeah. And they didn't used to be everywhere.

N**Nate Strum** 38:31

No, they were, they were intentional about what they wanted to do. And by the way, stopped at Dash and Joey's while I was in Wamphoc today.

J**Jason Duff** 38:37

Oh, good.

N**Nate Strum** 38:38

Got a nice little whey shake. It was really warm outside. It was delicious. Chad says hi.

J**Jason Duff** 38:41

He thinks I'm amazing. That's awesome.

N**Nate Strum** 38:43

That's great. Chad's great. But that's the thing. And again, from a— so if that's the private market side of it, from an economic development public side, our goal is to create vibe. I want to create a space for businesses who naturally are growing, think of us when those moments happen. Like we've seen a couple of different— now that the word's out that we're doing something down in Creekside, for example, we've gotten contacts about bakeries looking to expand because that was a thing on the board. We've gotten a couple of different wine folks, purveyors who were like, yep, I want to open up my second wine shop or my third wine shop in your town because this is a demographic and I love being that close to the city without being in Columbus proper. Right. And so it's about creating that vibe. It's about creating that feeling and it's about creating that message around those spaces that people, that business can relate to immediately. And then being able to be engaged and, and damn it, people, follow through. When a business contacts you and is looking to expand, locate, understand, I hear regularly the loss of opportunity because you never follow through.

J**Jason Duff** 39:47

No one called me back.

N**Nate Strum** 39:48

No one called me back. I sent an email. I never heard anything back. Um, I popped by city hall and no one, no one was there.

J**Jason Duff** 39:54

That's so sad.

N**Nate Strum** 39:55

It's crazy. I mean, that's the, that's the most basic thing you can be doing, quite frankly. Yeah. And so from an economic development standpoint, not only is it a matter of following through, but it's also finding the right team members who can also execute with you. I have a Henry Ford quote on my board that planning without implementation is just a hallucination. And so if you don't have the team to also implement things, you're just dreaming at this point. So it's about being intentional about finding those right partners, not only external but internal. To kind of help move your stuff forward. So I have Courtney Thrain, who's a great partner and friend. She's a Main Streets USA advocate, but she gets the small business side so well because she's constantly just on the pavement talking to businesses. How can we help? How can we help? How can we help? And then, oh, by the way, here's people who are coming into the market to help, help, help, help, help.

J**Jason Duff** 40:43

So that's great. What, what are you most excited about right now? And this could be professionally, personally, like what, what's something It's a great question. That right now you're just— I'm just excited about this.

N**Nate Strum** 40:55

I'm excited for the change that's coming to Central Ohio as a whole. Um, you know, I, I hate going to meetings now at this point and talking about Intel because I'm the guy who's like, I just want to get it done. Yeah, I want to see what the next thing's going to be, right? But the, the rapid change that we've seen the last 6 and a half years since I've come back to the marketplace, even in Central Ohio, you know, what's the next big deal, what's the next small deal What's— how's this redefining our communities? We held a public forum in Gahanna, and thankfully Lieutenant Governor Hughes had joined us in the chat too. He showed up and shared some of his thoughts on the projects that are happening and the role Intel's going to have on Gahanna, for example. But I'm ready to go. Like, I have the— I can feel the energy in our communities, and I'm just ready to go. But you can't just run. You gotta, you gotta learn to walk now. This is a whole new environment. You've got so much money on the sidelines that are pushing. They want to get things done before Intel kind of really ramps up hard. But then the population numbers — we had, I had a chance to connect with some of their folks already on the ground about our community, what's happening in our schools, everything else. And they're excited about Kahana. I'm excited about it. But I'm also excited for our partners in Reynoldsburg. I'm excited for our partners in Whitehall. I'm excited for our partners in Westerville.

J**Jason Duff** 42:08

It is regional. I mean, you think about things that there are these there's these, you know, local wins. There's regional wins. There's the state wins. And, you know, collectively, like, it's finding what your piece and your role in the puzzle is. Absolutely.

N**Nate Strum** 42:20

Yeah. I was just up in Cleveland. My in-laws are living downtown. And I was talking to a waitress. And she was talking about it. Really? And about what Cleveland's thinking is gonna happen now in this space and how they're 2 hours from the site. And so they're seeing pressures already. I've talked to friends out in Dayton who are, are, are planning, like, what's happening in Springfield and, and those midpoints out in the west side. This is— that's the energy I'm looking for. That's what I'm excited about is the change that's gonna happen. When I was in high school, we— I wrote up my, my final paper. It's, again, lame, lame, lame. But if you get a chance to read Dr. Johnson's Who Moved My Cheese, go read Who Moved My Cheese.

J**Jason Duff** 43:03

Oh, it's a great book.

N**Nate Strum** 43:03

It's a great book.

J**Jason Duff** 43:04

And it's an easy, quick read.

N**Nate Strum** 43:06

Absolutely.. And I wrote my entire senior thesis around who moved my cheese.

J**Jason Duff** 43:09

Ken Blanchard. Yeah.

N**Nate Strum** 43:10

Yeah. And I mean, it was a 40-page book, 50-page book. It's not a— it's not a hard book at all. My professor, like, this is stupid, Nathan. I'm like, it's about change. It's about embracing change and understanding how it affects you. And you can be a hemming and haw or a sniff and a scurry. And I've always found myself to be that sniff and the scurry and gonna find the next thing. Right? Because if you hem and haw yourself in, you're just gonna fall apart.

J**Jason Duff** 43:34

Mm-hmm.

N**Nate Strum** 43:35

Um, and so that's what I'm most excited about is what's happening.

J**Jason Duff** 43:38

That's great. And you know, I, I just think to kind of wrap this up, I, I want to share like you are living that. Like today, you know, you had this visit with us here in Bellefontaine a little over a month ago, but you took action. You're literally staying in the downtown. Yep. Right. You're at the Loft Above. Mm-hmm. So, you know, staying in a local Airbnb, he is covered and, and, you know, you're eating and drinking your way through our town, which we appreciate. It's great. It— but he also took a road trip up to Walpok and, and I think part of the insight. One of the greatest things that you can do is get out of the bubble in your local community and go explore, ask questions, take pictures, bring those insights and that knowledge back to people in your town.

N**Nate Strum** 44:21

If you think that your town don't stink, then you're missing out on a lot of other great towns. Everyone's got a little bit of spin on stuff, and you should always be looking for that next thing.

J**Jason Duff** 44:31

And I think— but that's kind of the, the brother and sisterhood of the work that we all do. It's like, if it's working in your town and you're an hour away, it's not competition. No, just tell me what's working and we'll replicate that too. Yep. And then it— then we win.

N**Nate Strum** 44:47

Yeah, we all win.

J

Jason Duff 44:48

We all win.

N

Nate Strum 44:48

And I always joke, we're all frenemies in the industry. Yeah, you know, I mean, there's always gonna be a little bit of rivalry, a little jealousy, or, you know, whatever it is. But, but I tell you, they went there.

J

Jason Duff 44:59

What's competition? It makes you stronger.

N

Nate Strum 45:02

Yeah. Mm-hmm. Well, it drives innovation. Yeah. Right? Like, if, if I'm, I'm thrilled when I, when I see our partners in our, in our marketplace or even folks that I've worked with in the past in, in the Pittsburgh area, I, I joke regularly when I appear here, oh, well, we're gonna go to your site. We're gonna go over here and we're gonna go to Pittsburgh. And it's like, oh, you're going to Pittsburgh. Are you going to these sites? Yeah. Are you gonna hang out with these people? You tell Tim I said hi.

J

Jason Duff 45:23

You're waving. Yeah.

N

Nate Strum 45:24

I'll text my old boss. Hey, I hear you got I got a site visit tomorrow. Like, what the hell? Um, but it's fun that way, and it builds that camaraderie as well. But then when you, you're like, oh, so they landed there. I wonder what drove that decision. I wonder what I could have done better or helped build that narrative a little more effectively. Or, or where did I miss on the delta on the finances? Or what was my speed miss? You know, and then when you find that, you're like, all right, I can improve. I can do it next time. You're always driving on that next one.

J

Jason Duff 45:55

That's it. Cool. Love it. Yeah, thank you, Nate. Thanks.

N

Nate Strum 45:58

Yeah, and thank you for keeping your shirt on.

J

Jason Duff 46:00

Okay, just to preface that, yeah, just leave that there.

N

Nate Strum 46:05

That's how I want to close the show right there.

J**Jason Duff** 46:07

And well, I'm just saying, you will have to come back to the next episode to hear the full show. What's later on?

N**Nate Strum** 46:14

Okay.

J**Jason Duff** 46:16

Also, uh, just shenanigans happening around here. I walked back in before the episode and I find 3 of our team members all with the headphones on talking in the podcast. I— so little do they know I was recording the whole time. Oh, that's great. So maybe we'll have a little Small Nation bloopers.

N**Nate Strum** 46:36

I love it. As you should.

J**Jason Duff** 46:38

Yeah, but, uh, yeah, anything? I, I feel like you already kind of gave your golden nugget. Do you have anything else you want to give? Or the thing that I'll say is that you don't have to take this job so serious all the time. This is a fun job, fun career. And the thing that I just appreciate the most is that like just being real, authentic, and having fun, that's, that's, that's important. Yeah, I agree. Thanks for sharing.

N**Nate Strum** 46:59

Thank you, buddy. Yeah.

J**Jason Duff** 47:01

All right, well,

E**Ethan DeLeon** 47:01

thank you everyone for tuning in and checking out the Small Nation podcast. You can find us anywhere that you listen to your podcast, including Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and the Small Nation YouTube channel. I hope you were able to pull some value from that conversation. We hope to see you in the next one. If you enjoyed it, be sure to leave a like, comment, or a 5-star review to help more people to discover this podcast. Stay tuned to Small Nation on social media and keep up with all the cool projects that are happening here. And until next time, this is Ethan with the Small Nation Podcast signing off. Thanks everyone.

N**Nate Strum** 47:29

Thank you.