

Episode 18

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Logan County Chamber of Commerce, chamber of commerce role, public-private partnership, economic development, Connect Market Advocate Educate Advance, community improvement corporation, business incentives, Community Reinvestment Area, port authority sales tax exemption, JobsOhio and One Columbus grants, historic Opera Block, mylocalcareer.com workforce, downtown revitalization, managing conflict and personalities, designated outdoor refreshment area

SPEAKERS

Jason Duff, Ben Vollrath, Ethan DeLeon

B **Ben Vollrath** 00:00

And so we boiled it down to 5 tenets that we feel like are our responsibility. And to kind of sum it up, we feel that if a business is a chamber member, they should have a better chance of success than any other business in the community. And we look at that through Connect, Market, Advocate, Educate, Advance.

E **Ethan DeLeon** 00:28

Hey everyone, my name is Ethan DeLeon and I'm here with our founder and CEO of Small Nation, Jason Duff. Today we have the president of the Logan County Chamber of Commerce, Ben Vollrath, on the show with 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. So, uh, Jason, why don't you give an introduction to who our guest is today?

J **Jason Duff** 00:55

Thanks, Ethan. Hello everyone, um, welcome to the podcast. It's a pleasure to have Ben Vollrath with us today. Ben is someone that I've had the pleasure to work with— has it now been 4 years? How long?

B **Ben Vollrath** 01:06

4 years. 4 years this month.

J**Jason Duff** 01:08

Oh, congratulations on that. Um, you know, Ben has been a leader in our community, particularly for businesses and also organizations and connecting, connecting community. And I think that's a, a theme that a lot of towns are really trying to figure out because you have all these various groups of people, um, organizations. And entrepreneurs by nature are pretty bold people, and there's lots of personalities. And, and, you know, it takes a certain style of a leader to listen and then pull all that together. So I'm excited to, to dive in today. But Ben, just a pleasure to have you on the show.

B**Ben Vollrath** 01:45

Thanks for having me, guys. Glad to be here too.

J**Jason Duff** 01:47

Absolutely. So I'm curious, how does one— what was your story, at least, of how you got into the role that you are today?

B**Ben Vollrath** 01:54

There is no one road to economic development, and mine is probably the same as many— went totally different directions. So I grew up in Marysville, just down the road from Bellefontaine, and went to school in Chicago, tried to move down to Texas where my fiancée's family was. That didn't pan out at the time. Looked in Chicago, couldn't find opportunities there that were just the right fit, so felt like Columbus area was back to where I needed to be. Worked at National City Bank, transitioned to PNC Bank when that got acquired, was a branch manager for PNC for a number of years down near Riverside Hospital. And at the time we were living back in Marysville, so it was hard just having that longer commute and being a smaller town guy. So my wife and I said, well, let's consolidate effort. Let's live, work, worship, serve in one community. So found a job with Dayton Power and Light working in Union County, Marysville. I did that for 6 years doing community and economic development. Covered Union, Logan, and Champaign counties. I got to be a lot more familiar with Bellefontaine that time, some of the elected officials out here, probably crossed paths with you, Jason, during that window, but truly fell in love with the economic development field. We are fortunate in that the Public Utilities Commission said while I was there, "Hey, DP&L, you need to start putting more dollars into economic development.". And it just happened that I was one of the guys that raised my hand and said, hey, I'd like to be part of that. All right. And so got some neat opportunities there to really grow and find my passion. Tried to move to Texas again.

J**Jason Duff** 03:32

My— I tried to get you back.

B**Ben Vollrath** 03:33

They did, man. My 3 of my 4 college roommates are there. My wife's whole family extended and immediate is there. Looked for jobs, had job offers, looked for houses. And it all seemed to be lining up. And my faith is one of the most important things to me, and God just really closed that door for us and said, you know what, that's not where you need to be right now. And yeah, Bellefontaine was not high on the radar at the time, but it just ended up to be a great fit. Prior Chamber of Commerce president was transitioning to be county commissioner, and I jumped in here. I would have been about 4 years ago and moved my family up here from Marysville and Absolutely love it. Uh, talked to my kids last— a few weeks ago we were traveling and we were actually down in Missouri. It's like, guys, this is beautiful here. Would you ever want to live here? Like, why would we want to live anywhere other than Bellefontaine? Oh, come on, Dad.

J**Jason Duff** 04:24

So, you know, you mentioned growing up in Marysville. So Marysville is a neighboring community about 30 minutes away from here, and it's closer to Columbus. So a lot of folks, um, really prefer that because it's closer to the bigger city. And kind of what's happened over the last 50 years in Marysville is its population has, I think, almost not— at least doubled, if not quadrupled. Um, and, you know, it's experienced massive growth. And for, for a number of years growing up in a town like that, can you just be honest, like, how did you perceive Bellefontaine?

B**Ben Vollrath** 04:56

Bellefontaine was just a pass-by place. Literally, you know, we would go spend New Year's Eve every year up at Indian Lake, which is in the northwest corner of Logan County, and Bellefontaine is on the way on US 33. I didn't know it existed. You just drive right past. There literally was nothing on the highway. There may have been a water tower that said Bellefontaine, but it'd be so easy to just blow past it and never know it existed.

J**Jason Duff** 05:22

And you know, that's coming from growing up a half an hour away. And I think there are a lot of people that are listening or thinking about their towns and communities and saying, you know, we are an underrated town or our town has these challenges. But I, I think hearing, you know, and, and seeing the work that Ben's doing today is just hearing the story of what his kids was sharing about, like, why would you wanna live anywhere else? There's a process and there's, it takes vision, leadership, people, organizations, money, all of those things to be able to shape and, and make those changes.

B**Ben Vollrath** 05:53

Completely agree. And, and that's really part of what our, our Chamber of Commerce serves to do. So we don't cover just Bellefontaine. Our chamber covers all of Logan County. So we have about 470 members countywide, some of them even outside the county. But we have a somewhat unique structure in that our Chamber of Commerce, our membership, our visitors bureau, and our economic development are all under one roof. And it's kind of nice to be what some would say kind of the front door for business. If you have any questions in those areas, you can pop into our office and we can direct you to the right spot. If we can't help you right right away. And it's just neat to be able to have such a vibrant, growing core within Logan County, this kind of pocket of health, and you're able to see that growing farther out and stretching into other parts of the county. And that's part of what we do now too, is how do you take and replicate— not necessarily replicate, but how do you take the pockets of health in your community and say, hey, this is good, let's spread this? It's not recreating the wheel necessarily, but it's every town has a unique feel and flavor, even across our county. And so that's been a fun part of my job the past 4 years.

J**Jason Duff** 07:04

Ben, I'm so excited to have you on today. I know we were talking before the episode a little bit. You know, we've had other economic developer leaders on the podcast as well, but you are here in Logan County. Your office is here in Bellefontaine. You've actually been through the— through some life, at least over the past 4 years with us and working with Small Nation. And I know a lot of people coming in, looking in at what Small Nation is doing and just the revitalization in Bellefontaine as a whole. And they're curious, how does it work, right? Because sometimes we have city leaders coming in, sometimes we have, you know, private people or part of university, like, uh, higher education professionals coming in. But I'm excited for you to be here to kind of shed some light on that. So, um, can you give a breakdown about how our Chamber of Commerce and Economic Development kind of works here in Logan County? I know it's It's not— it's kind of a hybrid situation, right? So if you could, you shed some light on that because I know it's different for a lot of different counties, a lot of different areas of the state.

B**Ben Vollrath** 08:06

You're exactly right. Every community does it differently. Some, it's a completely privatized organization. You have a small nation of sorts that that's it. That's what economic development is. Others, it's 100% public where it's run through a city office or a county office. We're a public-private partnership. Essentially, we, the chamber is a nonprofit organization, but our funding for economic development is a partnership with the county commissioners, the city of Bellefontaine, and then private industry, our larger industry players across the county say, hey, we believe in what's happening here. We want to see more growth. We want to see more attention on workforce, on housing, on infrastructure. And so they invest. And so the public-private comes together, invests into the chamber. We have a community improvement corporation that actually serves as the conduit for some of those dollars, and the community improvement corporation does not have staff, so they partner and enter into an agreement with the chamber for us to perform the economic development operations for the city and the county. It's worked well. Again, it allows to have that one door for economic development, so it's not a what you need to call the city for. If you're in this area, you need to call the county, you need to call the township. We have a small enough community that we're able to do it in, in one place, but we still have limited resources. I'm sure many of your, many listeners are probably part of small communities. You say, what if, what if we had more? What if there were more, more assets, more people? And that's been the beauty of this relationship with Small Nation. Is that there are things that our office does not have the time, doesn't have the dollars or the resources to accomplish. And Small Nation has stepped in and said, you know what, we can move the needle here. Ben Chamber, you guys focus in these areas, let us focus in these areas, and let's partner to make sure that these are moving the community in the right direction. So that's just kind of the tip of the iceberg, I'd say, for how things have worked.

J**Jason Duff** 10:07

Yeah, no, that was a great introduction. And I think a lot of people can benefit from this. And I think there's a lot of professionals curious how to kind of, like you were saying, move the needle and, and kind of fall prey to just sitting stagnant for a while. One of the big benefits of the chamber is that they have a board, and they typically have a charter or a mission or bylaws that govern why they exist. And getting a diverse group of people together that have perspectives and ideas with the guise and the focus to do what's best for the community. That is, that is a really important role for a Chamber of Commerce. What's tough that many chambers struggle with is the speed of getting something done, and then also being able, you know, information is currency. And so some business deals, some information, you know, you can't really share it with everyone because that can actually ruin a, a deal or a possibility. So I think that part of what I encourage investors and, and, and other people listening on the podcast do is get involved as a volunteer to serve in your chamber as a, as an ambassador, or maybe join a committee or join, join the board, because there's great learning networking skills that you can gain from that. But then also really speak to your chamber employees and team members about what's missing, because that could be a business opportunity if— and I think you know, Ben, you know, shared that we would love to do more external business recruitment. It is just something we just don't have the bandwidth for in our day-to-day. And so what we like to do is say, okay, what is missing in Logan County, and how can we, as we travel to other counties, other states, meet those people and potentially inspire them to want to come and open up something here? And I think that's been really awesome because when we have those visitors or those people in town, Ben and his team are the first people to say, stop by the chamber office. I'd love to meet them, love to connect with them, love to let them know of all the tools and resources that we have available that maybe would encourage or help them feel more confident with investing or saying yes. Yeah, I think this brings up a good— just, uh, another question people may or may not be wondering, but, um, how do people get involved with the chamber? Like, what Maybe let's start with what, in your words, if you could sum it up, is the— what does the chamber serve for the community? And then from there, how do people get involved and be a part of that conversation?

B**Ben Vollrath** 12:43

That was a great question. Because when I, when I first came here, I was kind of sitting there scratching my head. I was like, what, what did— what's the chamber supposed to do?

J**Jason Duff** 12:50

What's our job? Well, you plan the golf outing, right?

B**Ben Vollrath** 12:52

Yeah, that's, that's all you do is golf outings and coffee events.

J**Jason Duff** 12:55

That's right.

B**Ben Vollrath** 12:55

That's it. And I think that can often be the perception from, especially if people aren't familiar with a community, if they're part of an urban area and maybe they haven't been in a small community before, new entrepreneurs coming in, it's like, what is this? Why should I even consider being involved? And so when I first started, sat down with our team, said, hey, what are we about? What is the purpose of this? If we have 400+ chamber members, how do we make sure they get value? And we know what it is that they're expecting of us. And so we boiled it down to 5 tenets that we feel like are our responsibility. And to kind of sum it up, we feel that if a business is a chamber member, they should have a better chance of success of any other business in the community. And we look at that through Connect, Market, Advocate, Educate, and Advance. Connecting is the idea of how do we help you as an entrepreneur connect with other small businesses connect with potential customers. And we do that through various networking events, communications, keeping in the loop about what's happening in the community. A lot of times our small businesses, after the fact an event has occurred, say, "Hey, I didn't know." "No idea." "What was going on here? This looked great." Well, you know, be part of the chamber. We'd love to keep you informed about things. So that connection is a big piece. The education is a big deal. Again, we have so many businesses that they spend day in, day out working in their retail shop, in their restaurant, that they don't get very often to step back, pull out and work on their business. And so we look at that as part of our role too, is how do we continue to educate? School didn't end when you graduated high school or college. The idea is this is a lifelong thing and we want to be part of that solution for our business owners. Maybe it's something on social media. Or website development or accounting, insurance, things that you don't want to spend time thinking about but are important. So that connect, educate, market, putting a spotlight on our businesses, showing off the things that they're doing, advocating, that's more of our benefits, the things that they need, whether it's on an insurance side or maybe it's office supply discounts, who knows what it might be, finding unique benefits that are advocating for them. And then the advancing is the economic development piece that I think is really special about our chamber, that we have that economic development under our umbrella, excuse me. So we can look out ahead and say, where does our community need to go? What are the things that we need to be thinking about? And that's where, again, where we tie back into groups like Small Nation where you all move so much faster than the public side or public-private side. So we can come to you and say, hey, what are you seeing? What's happening that we need to have on the radar? I get those emails and nudges from Jason all the time saying, hey, you might want to take a look at this other community. They've started investing in their downtown in these really unique ways. How do we keep that conversation going in our community? Or, hey, we have some people coming into town that are using electric vehicles. What are we doing now to make sure that they have places to charge, not just at the post office? Things like that. It's that brainstorming and collaboration that makes It makes the partnership really successful.

J**Jason Duff** 16:11

And I think that just to add to that, like, you know, what the chamber serves as a conduit to those public individuals that hold public office or serve at the voters' discretion, whether it's county commissioners or city council or the mayor. And I think it can be a really good barometer for them to have someone that can be and say, hey, this is what I'm hearing. This is what our community needs. Or it, it's competitive landscape. This is some things that we need to be doing to be different. Um, and so I, I appreciate you mentioning that, Ben. And, and I think the other thing you need to look into what your community offers in terms of incentives. And one of the toolkits that Chambers of Commerce, um, have related to economic development is there's a lot of tools that may, as you're starting your business, expanding your business, growing your business, that you may benefit from. Can you kind of walk through some of those tools that may exist for people that are listening?

B**Ben Vollrath** 17:12

Yeah, some fun things, especially if you're an Ohioan listening to this. Our office gets to serve as the conduit back to our regional economic development group, One Columbus, and One Columbus is our conduit to our state economic development JobsOhio. And so in the past 2 years, we've helped 15+ businesses across Logan County receive either \$25,000 or \$50,000 grants simply for investing back in their small business. This was a unique program that the state was running called Inclusion Grants. The idea was, how do we help small, really manufacturing-type businesses? You know, maybe it's 2, 3, 4, 5 people that we want to see them grow, and the state doesn't normally invest in those. But that information kind of cascades down to the region, to our local economic development office, and we connect the dots for folks to say, hey, I think you would be a great fit for this. And this particular one was targeted towards women-owned businesses, veteran-owned businesses, and certain zip codes across our county. So we found that pocket and hit those people.

J**Jason Duff** 18:16

Very specific.

B**Ben Vollrath** 18:16

Right. It really was. So that's one example. And I'm sure, again, depending on where you're listening, every community has their own buckets and every state has their own buckets. Oftentimes the chamber is a place that is a kind of repository for where those— where to go for them. Some other ones that we're working with your team on right now, again, tie back to JobsOhio, our state economic development group. They said we want to invest in communities to try to help them plan for the future, plan for what that next catalytic project would be. And so I'm sure you can share some more on this, but help connect some of the dots and be at the table for a project planning grant. And we're not talking major bucks, you know, it was \$20,000.

J**Jason Duff** 19:00

I mean, that, that makes a major difference. I mean, just major bucks to me. Yeah, it's real money. And we're working on a— what is the largest project that our team has ever taken on, which is the historic Opera Block. It's 40,000 square feet of space, 13 storefronts, 3 stories. You know, 3 or 4 years ago, the building was condemned. I mean, there's, there's lots of problems with it, but You know, if you drive by and see the progress that's happening today, it doesn't even look like the same building. And part of that, having that planning grant to really work with professionals to think about, well, what, what do we need to do to make this building safe? What could we do that would make this block economically viable? That was a, a, a partnership between the chamber and our city and JobsOhio and One Columbus. And we're now even taking those planning documents to see if we qualify for even more funds. Yeah, I love that. And I'm glad we're headed here because I know you shared with me a little bit. We had a chance to catch up and about how that process went and how— I mean, obviously we were interested in the space, but you kind of helped a lot with that, facilitating that, you know, transition from what it was to what it's becoming. You mind sharing a little bit of how that went down?

B**Ben Vollrath** 20:13

Yeah. The neat thing with any project, there's so many people involved and the Small Nation team, has done incredible work in downtown Bellefontaine. And anytime that there's a building that needs attention, I think it ends up on your radar, whether it's front of mind or not.

J**Jason Duff** 20:31

I was going to say, if it doesn't end up on our radar, and I think that's where the people listening was just taking and getting involved in your community, because if someone doesn't save a roof, if someone isn't paying attention to buildings that have illegal activities or problems that are happening with them, then that becomes a much more significant community problem.

B**Ben Vollrath** 20:50

It is. And so having someone pay attention to what buildings need attention, where is there legitimately a fire risk for a downtown block being destroyed? And I think that's kind of where some of this started is this historic Opera Block, beautiful building, started looking from the exterior that it was having some disrepair. The prior owner wasn't able to invest in it the way that was needed. And I know your team had met with the owner several times, and we started meeting with him from the chamber end just to kind of understand his story a little bit and figure out his appetite for improving the facility, making sure that it was safe. You learned through that that their, you know, the second and third floors are in really bad condition. You know, I'm sure there's documentation of it at this point, but it was a place that you couldn't really walk through. It wasn't, wasn't safe. And so that's when you start getting connections to local government involved, and they're able to come and document and do fire inspections. And it kind of moved the process along with the facility to say, hey, there's enough that needs to be done here that the second and third floors, they have to be condemned for now. And that was a turning point for getting to the spot where the current owner said, you know what, I really don't have the wherewithal to get this building up to what it needs to be. And then our office started working with the owner to say, hey, can we start bringing some investors in to just take a look? I know Small Nation had taken a look at it, but we were able to bring two others through and tour the facility. And sometimes just getting a few perspectives on it is helpful to nudge the owner along, say, okay, well, maybe there's a little bit more interest in this than than I thought. Working with the, the county government to say, hey, now that the second and third floors aren't, aren't inhabitable, what does that mean for, for property valuation? And seeing them say, you know what, that's a good point, let's make an adjustment to this. And so getting the, the property values adjusted to a proper level that was appropriate, just kind of getting the property in a teed-up position so that the right time, the right investor could come in, and the current owner would say you know what, that is a fair price. This is, this is something that needs to happen. And so again, there were lots of parties involved with that. We just got to have a small piece. And there were conversations that happened with multiple investors along the way. Uh, you gather a piece of information from one, you pass along to others, and connecting with the city and local officials, and it all turned into a spot where, where you all were able to step in.

J**Jason Duff** 23:25

Well, and I think the win-win was, in talking with the previous owner, he finally reached the idea that he wanted to sell. And, you know, offered up a price and we agreed on— I think the acquisition cost was \$310,000. So that is a lot of money, but for that much square footage, that probably we felt was a fair price. What most building owners and investors don't know is what is necessary to do the renovation. Yeah. And I think that's where those numbers start to swing and can swing in into millions. So part of doing this planning work and working with the chamber, bringing in professionals, is we can start to get a, a pro forma and a, a reality of what that cost and that investment is. And then if there are any incentives that make sense to, uh, apply for or work with, uh, area agencies to do that. So in terms of tools that sometimes exist, there are historic tax credits both state and federal programs that are available. There's something called New Market Tax Credits for, you know, being able to look at readapting and using it to a different use that you can, you know, benefit from those. And then there are other programs and incentives that might be available through your local government when it comes to the tax authority, how they look at real estate tax assessments. But you want to share just other kind of tools that may exist related to a real estate acquisition kind of project?

B**Ben Vollrath** 24:54

Yeah, you should definitely look into the local community to figure out Do they have a community reinvestment area established, a CRA as it's often called? Within our community here in Logan County, there are probably 4 different CRA zones, Bellefontaine being one of them citywide. What that means, if you invest in that zone and it could be remodeling, it could be new construction, depending on the amount of investment that you do and the number of employees that are created, number of jobs created, there's up to a 15-year property tax exemption. Base amount is 50% property tax exemption, but certain circumstances can even go to the school boards and community and say, hey, we'd like to consider higher than that. But, you know, those are in place in many communities to help attract investment and help spur it. We just this year in 2022 worked with two other villages in Logan County to help establish CRAs to help them with their redevelopment. And again, that kind of gets back to the things that our office is learning and partnering with Small Nation. And again, we're not trying to replicate that in every community across Logan County, but how do you take some of the lessons learned and some of the pieces that have been helpful? So, you know what, we can do this in other places. And that's where part of the chamber is able to add value to is connecting those dots. So CRA is one. Another one we actually have, a local port authority that runs through our office. Port authority is an accessible tool in any community, even if you don't have one within your community. There you can tap into others across Ohio, and it provides an opportunity for a sales tax exemption on construction materials if you do financing through the port. So we've had several projects that have taken advantage of that. In our community, it's 7.25% sales tax, and so that's a significant savings if you're doing a a couple million dollar project.

J**Jason Duff** 26:51

Yeah, I love that. I, and I don't want listeners who, especially real estate investors, if you are listening to this, I want you to stop, rewind that, and replay that because I feel like you just unlocked some secret levels for some people that, you know, were unaware of that, those kind of resources before. And this is where relationships are so important because, you know, knowing the chamber and knowing other leaders in economic development, there's always new things that are coming out And it's having that relationship of feeling that you can trust those folks when you, you know, share intimate things about your business or goals that you have, that they maybe will realize later on, oh, I need to introduce you to this person, or I need to send you the information about this new grant or program that may be out there.

B**Ben Vollrath** 27:33

I agree. And I think some too, uh, your community, maybe you're looking at saying, my community doesn't have those tools in place. Some of them you can pursue, you know, establishing a CRA is not an overly burdensome process. It's something that's outlined by the state Department of Development. You can do it. It would probably take you about, I don't know, maybe a week's worth of activity of planning and preparing, and you submit an application and you'll get your approval back from the state that it's in place. You have to obviously get some legislation approved at the local level too, but there's little things like that. Then beyond that too, if you say, you know, well, we don't, we're not pursuing that, you probably have local incentives that maybe are not directly monetary that you can begin sharing or presenting. It's not always about the dollar, and when it comes to the development, it's all about speed, risk, and money. And so how fast can you help me make this happen? How can you reduce my risk in it? And how can you help with lowering the cost? And so the speed piece is a significant one when it comes to Permitting, working with a local building authority, with hiring a workforce. What tools can you bring to the table to help with hiring? And that's been another one that we've partnered significantly on with a local workforce website. And we're excited to have taken a piece that Small Nation developed in another community and brought that back to implement in our county.

J**Jason Duff** 29:04

And you know, that website is mylocalcareers.com.

B**Ben Vollrath** 29:08

Yep, no S, just my local.

J**Jason Duff** 29:09

My local career. Thank you. [Mylocalcareer.com](http://mylocalcareer.com).

B**Ben Vollrath** 29:14

Yeah, that's awesome. That's the kind of way to, you know, businesses coming in to say, hey, I'm going to need to hire 5 people. Say, great, you know what, we have a tool to connect you just with our local job seekers. And so sometimes that's the incentive that a local entrepreneur investor needs. Said, hey, I know how to set up my business, but I don't know how to hire people. Help me connect the dots. That's where a chamber or other local organization can really jump in and help. So, yeah, good things.

J**Jason Duff** 29:40

Yeah. And I love the collaborative, you know, stories here. And I feel like, you know, we can take a second to realize that we're blessed because I feel like not a lot of people have that. And if, if you're in those communities, you have difficult people, I would, you know, encourage you to check yourself first and make sure you are not being that difficult person. Holding back progress. Um, can I share though with that? Because I think that's a really, you know, one thing that Ben really shines with is that by nature, people that start businesses probably from a very young age maybe didn't fit the mold. And, and that's a good thing. So if you're listening and you're like, I never really played by the rules, I never really, you know, wanted to like do what everyone else did. I wanted to do my own thing. That is kind of a common trait. So you have people that have all these skill sets, personalities that help them get to a certain point in life of being independent, creative, and starting something. Then when you get to be the chamber and you, you work of putting these people on committees and in groups, you have lots of different personalities.

B**Ben Vollrath** 30:50

Oh my gosh, yeah, right.

J**Jason Duff** 30:52

I mean, the phone calls, the emails, and then, you know, people, everyone, people have feelings. They have, you know, maybe their company only has 1 employee or 3 employees where then you have some organizations that have hundreds of employees, but you gotta get all those people around the same table, around the plan and working forward. Tell me about that, Ben.

B**Ben Vollrath** 31:12

It is, it's, oh my gosh. You know, you know, I, I thought that moving from Dayton Power and Light where we touched 24 counties, moving to one county. I said, you know, I'm going to be in one community, one place. I don't have 24 places I have to focus on.

J**Jason Duff** 31:26

Easy.

B**Ben Vollrath** 31:27

It's the same, you know, no matter what community you're in, you have 24 different pockets. And then within those pockets, you have a countless number of opinions and directions that people want to go. And so I've screwed up many times in this in my 4 years already, where again, you have a chamber hat where we have 400 1,000+ members. And what I do sometimes for a project or program may be good for some, but others really don't like it. Yeah. And, you know, I learned through that early on. Some of our significant local employers took some action and they reached out and said, "Hey, what's going on? Why are you doing this? This isn't productive or helpful for us." I said, "Oh my goodness." didn't even consider it. And so I guess my point in sharing this is twofold. One, you really do have to pause and consider how does this impact or get perceived by some of the rest of the community. It doesn't mean you don't move forward with it. It just means we need to be aware. And the issues that I've run into would easily have been avoided with just a little bit of communication. Took an extra email or a phone call or stopping someone's office, say, hey, I just want you to know we're going to go forward with this type of program. I know this could have an impact on you, but this is why we're doing it. And we want, we just want you to be in a loop about what's going on. Those things avoid issues just by communicating. And sometimes we want to move fast, we want to avoid the confrontation. So you just go. And sometimes that is necessary. But when it comes to a community where there's political interests involved, different opinions involved, extra communication goes a long way.

J**Jason Duff** 33:13

I, I admire that. And how do you, in terms of dealing with conflict— so conflict, you know, with committees— I mean, in a town there's so many different events that happen. You are planning parades, you are, you know, one of the newest legislation pieces has been introducing these designated outdoor refreshment areas, which is allowing alcohol to be, you know, served and provided by liquor establishments, that you can carry it in the public right away. So like, there's all these new innovations and changes which at some point are friction points. Um, yeah, how do you kind of approach those kind of things, those changes? Jason, be ready because I'm coming back to you with that same question. All right, go ahead, Ben.

B**Ben Vollrath** 33:56

You know, it does take zooming out a little bit and looking at where are we going as a community, and it's so easy to get bogged down in the weeds of a parking spot, a tree, you know, a trash can, a trash can, whatever it might be in your scenario. And if you pause for a moment, say zoom out and say, where are we going? What are we trying to accomplish here? And getting that little bit higher level view, that's so helpful for me. And looking at it and say, all right, where does this take our community? Does this progress us forward? Does this move us the direction that we want to be in? And if the answer is yes, that gives me a lot more gumption and courage to say, okay, we can have some of these conversations, some of these hard conversations. So, you know what, this trash can, I realize, is in a difficult place for you, but here's how this is going to be driving us a different direction. Here's how we connect the dots. But again, it's— people want to be heard more than Everybody wants to be known. They want to be heard. They want to have their voice considered and provide an opportunity for that. Sometimes the best outlet, even if their ideas do not get implemented, let them be heard. And sometimes that causes friction even within, you know, between Small Nation or the Chamber. You all move fast, faster than we are able to, and sometimes faster than what the community is even comfortable with. And there have been points of friction that have resulted as a result from that. But again, we zoom out, say, hey, where are we going? What are we trying to accomplish? We can, we can have disagreements and still move the right direction, and we'll circle back on those points that have been contentious and figure out how do we, how do we make this better next time.

J**Jason Duff** 35:40

Yeah, and I'm glad you said that too, because it's not all, it's not all easy. Yeah, it doesn't go as smooth all the time. Um, and so like, I, I, you know I think you guys have both done a great job of, you know, working through some of that and keeping the collaborative energy going here. You, you too, and others, right? There's lots of people that this applies to. But what about you with working with More Public or with your chamber? What are some of those things that you have to kind of remind yourself to work through friction? I think some of the hardest points are oftentimes when there are new things that are being introduced. Change is hard. And a lot of times when you're piloting something brand new, it, it can lend itself to be a friction point. So some of the examples would be probably, you know, outdoor dining. Yeah, 8 years ago when we were proposing putting outdoor patio spaces in the public right-of-ways, on sidewalks, removing parking to put— well, I know, and in every town, I mean, every parking space is very valuable, but I will tell you, dining alfresco is even more important in economic development today. And so 8 years ago, that was a very new thing that when it was first introduced created lots of controversy. And a few things— it said someone else is making money in the public right-of-way, we potentially are serving alcohol in the public right-of-way, and who's going to pay for these, you know, improvements that's benefiting a private business. Looking back on it now, I think many people could argue that was one of the best investments and decisions that we, working with the chamber and the city and the building owner and the business, to make that happen. Now, especially coming out of COVID every town and every business in the country is looking at how to do that. So I, I would say what Ben, I think, does a great job of, of looking at that 20,000-foot view, listening But then at some level you have to make a decision. And, and I think one thing he mentioned earlier, every decision that you make, do not expect to get unanimous support in agreement with it. And even sometimes it may be a very split decision. You may have 50% of people that are like, I love that idea, and 50% of people said, I hate that idea. But you — that, that's leadership, and that takes courage.

B**Ben Vollrath** 38:05

I agree. Uh, every day we're making choices that are, are are not pleasing to some. We're not going to make everybody happy in this. Yeah, just, it's not possible. I think the other thing that I've learned through this too is everybody has their unique talents and abilities. I'm not Jason Duff.

J**Jason Duff** 38:23

I can't be. I'm not Ben Volrath.

B**Ben Vollrath** 38:25

Right. You know, and everyone, everybody brings an asset to the table. But I can't expect Jason to react the way that I do. I can't expect the small, small shop owner to react the way that I do, because they have— they're unique. They operate differently.

J**Jason Duff** 38:45

They have lenses. I kind of use the word lens.

B**Ben Vollrath** 38:47

That's a good way to put it.

J**Jason Duff** 38:49

You know, the shop owner— and it's interesting, in our downtown, you have restaurant group, you've got retailers, you've got professional offices, and then you've got downtown residents. And what's interesting, I love to talk about parking, because that is really— when you go to other towns, it's like, that is really the crux of Always of conflict. But like, here's a serious issue. We're in a housing crisis right now. Housing crisis. There's not enough housing, uh, of all types in stock. And we have a historic downtown that if you don't intentionally think of where your upper floor residential loft people are going to park, you're not going to get new housing. So it, it's in, in, you know, these are kind of the issues that we're working in the town that, that one perception may be Well, that's not our problem to figure out where the residents have to park because we need to focus on what business owners need. Well, that, that's a stakeholder group too, but like it's thinking through, and I love what he said, the 20,000-foot view and listening and creating the space to hear those various stakeholder groups. And then we have to make a decision.

B**Ben Vollrath** 39:55

You're right. And, and you start thinking about, uh, let's run with the housing piece, uh, parking, sure. But they had to start thinking about this placemaking that you have, or people now living downtown. Sure, they have restaurants, they have entertainment, but they also have pets. Where in the world are you going to take your pet to go out to the bathroom? And we don't have that much green space in our downtowns. And so that starts to impact others that have tiny little bits of green space. And because everyone needs a—

J**Jason Duff** 40:23

Oh my gosh. Okay. I am going to share. I have been— received emails of pictures of dog poop asking me when I'm coming down to pick it up. And again, I—

B**Ben Vollrath** 40:33

it was your fault.

J**Jason Duff** 40:36

I mean, luckily they didn't accuse me of doing that. And my dog lives a county away, so I don't think it was my dog. But like, these are kind of community issues that you deal with. And it is, but it actually isn't. These problems are opportunities. Sure. Because what if that idea led to let's create a dog park in our town that's going to lead to the pet store, to the pet store, to the grooming business. And the data shows, especially millennials, they might and may be waiting to have children, but they have multiple pets. Right. And that, that could be how we and our town, our community plant the flag to take a problem and make it a significant opportunity.

B**Ben Vollrath** 41:16

Let me be clear.

J**Jason Duff** 41:16

We haven't solved that one yet, but for people listening, I'm expecting a dog park here in downtown here.

B**Ben Vollrath** 41:23

Yeah, right. And, you know, those are the things too that you can't be limited by what currently exists. You know, I know that's something that your team lives by. You go out and you look at buildings, you look at a downtown, and you can't look at just what currently is there. You have to visualize, well, what could be? And maybe that means a building's renovated and becomes repurposed. Maybe it means a building goes away and becomes a park. Maybe it's a trail that connects into get people that are downtown access to a park. There could be an infinite number of solutions, but it's so hard to drive every single day into a community and, and to stop and say, I, I need to look at it differently. I need to, to look past that same brick and mortar that I, I've kind of forgotten about. It just kind of glazes into the background. So that's one thing I would recommend is go in to your community again for as if it's the first time. So what if we could start over? You almost blow this up. What would it look like? What would you do? Where would you put a park? Where would you put benches? Where would you put trees? Where would you put that diner? It's, it's kind of a fun exercise, and you may not be there today, but maybe that's something that you start doing some long-range planning and thinking, well, what do we take to get there in 10 years?

J**Jason Duff** 42:40

Ben, as we kind of round third here on this episode here, I have just a few more questions, but What— how can communities find and activate investors or leaders to begin making a difference in your communities? I realize, you know, you were talking about even like the chamber's resources are limited sometimes. So maybe speak to other chambers, other economic developers that you can't— you can't do it all right. You have to partner. And if you feel alone, I know we've talked about that, you know, leadership can be a very lonely thing at times on different episodes. But what can you do in your position, in similar positions to kind of find and activate those leaders?

B**Ben Vollrath** 43:16

It is a challenge. And I think every community is at that spot of what's my next step? How do I take a step towards getting redevelopment or new folks coming in? And I think one, it starts with you got to have seats at your table. You got to make a spot. If you want to have folks get engaged, we need to welcome them in. I'll give you an example. Right now, we are working hard to try to attract another hotel to our community. And the— we've tried the traditional route and try to get a Fairfield Inn or a Hampton Inn, and our market just hasn't been quite large enough to attract that in. And so we've gone with a different model. There's one that's a local investor equity-driven product. It's called a Cobblestone Hotel. But that means we need local investors, and that's, that's fallen to our office right now to say, how do we pull these people together? How do we find them? Kind of your exact question. And it started with having some large group meetings of, hey, we've done a study that shows that we need a hotel. Here's the information. We want to share this out with the whole community. And so those first couple meetings, we had 50, 75 people attend. It was informational. Let's get everyone to a base level of understanding of what's happening. You can't expect someone to come throw dollars in your community if they don't have a base level of understanding of what the issue is. So bring them up to knowledge, and then you say, hey, here's how we take the next step towards getting this hotel. This is what we want. We need \$2 million, \$50,000 chunks. We need local investors to step up. Let's go tour the one that's nearby, 30 minutes away. Let's set up meetings for people to see that. Let's have them talk with investors in other communities. Start connecting the dots for them. Those that come to the table say, hey, I want you to go tell your friends. Go tell somebody else that you think might be interested in this. 'Cause the message gets dull and lost when I say it, when I email it or when I make that phone call. That first time, maybe it's good to get that first round of folks, but at that point you then have to trust on their network. And so I think that's where it begins is get that base knowledge of people, get them around the table, share with them the issue, the facts, some objective information, show them the opportunity and then let them go.

J**Jason Duff** 45:32

I, I love that. And here's why that hotel, we are so excited about it. And if you think about your community, it is an ecosystem. There are these different, uh, projects and businesses and things that feed and support and see other things grow. So if you have a really great bustling downtown that is a place that people want to eat and shop and, and go watch a show or listen to live music, if they're driving in an hour and they're enjoying an evening they need a place to stay. And right now we, we need more lodging and we need higher quality lodging. And so appreciate the chamber's investment and initiative of seeing that be built because when you have 60 or 70 new rooms, all of those folks are opportunities. They're going to spend money shopping in your community. Here's another way that we can help is that maybe we can't fund the \$2 or \$3 million new hotel, but we can help with smaller prototype examples to prove that there's a demand for lodging in our community. So one of our first projects was doing a luxury 2-bedroom Airbnb above our local coffee shop. Um, and you heard previously Jesse Lear from Epicurean Properties was the investor who did that. He has proved that there is a strong demand and need for that, which gave us the confidence. And today We are launching a brand new project in downtown Bellefontaine which is called Rainbow Row Bellefontaine. It includes 5 storefronts, 7 short-term rentals on the second floor in this beautiful Charleston, South Carolina-themed row of colorful, artistic, and fun buildings. Our hope is, is with us completing that here in January of 2023, our hope is, is that experiment builds the case and the confidence that Bellefontaine is a destination. Logan County, there is need for additional lodging and different lodging styles and types. So that's where I think investors, business owners, the people that are listening, when you hear what your chamber's strategic goals are and what the things they're trying to do, help them prototype and quickly get a viable product to market that then that will support those bigger dollars and investors coming in.

B**Ben Vollrath** 47:48

I like that. And I agree. I think some of the best work that my office can do is getting out of the way where, again, we don't have the staff and resources to do everything that we'd like to see done in this community. But let's allow and enable others to do it. And so sometimes the best thing that we can do is say, hey, Small Nation, go, or other entrepreneurs in our community, go. Run, make this happen. And how do we help get obstacles out of the way? And we're not always the best at doing that either, but, um, you know, our name isn't on every Small Nation project. Have we, have we been involved in some way? Absolutely.

J**Jason Duff** 48:24

But, and I think it doesn't matter. And I think the same thing is that the DNA of Small Nation also bleeds into a lot of the other projects and businesses that are here too. And I think that's probably, you mentioned the friction points, is Inclusivity is something, and I think that's a theme of what Ben is mentioning, but it's very hard, you know, if a non-chamber member comes to you and says, I want you to do this, there's that fine line of how much are we able to do in helping a non-chamber member. And I think that's the same true of what, when we build a company, we have tenants and we have business partners. And so a lot of our focus is on those core customers and clients. It's who feels like they're outside of that because they want to shine in the sun— sunlight too. And so I think that's another role, you know, I think Ben and the Chamber struggles with. How do we represent every community? How do we represent members and non-members? It's the same thing that we struggle with with tenants versus customers. Um, but we, we do our best. We really do. We do our best.

B**Ben Vollrath** 49:30

Yeah, and it's always going to be there. And I think part of what you can do, what you as listeners, investors, community, is celebrate and recognize the individual entrepreneurs too. The work that a chamber or community or developer does behind the scenes is phenomenal, the landlords. But get down to know who's running the business. That's good. And celebrate those individuals, tell their stories. I think that's something that you all do very well. Is you put a spotlight on the person that's on the front line. And that, that, that again, that bleeds out where folks say, oh my gosh, that's really cool. That could be me. I could do something like that. It becomes very personal. And again, the spotlight goes on the person that it really should. The rest of the community wins when entrepreneurs are at the front.

J**Jason Duff** 50:23

That's really good. Last couple of questions here. What are some of the professional development resources such as books, podcasts, courses or groups that have helped you in your journey?

B**Ben Vollrath** 50:32

When I first started at the chamber, I guess it was a little bit before I started with the chamber, uh, I, I went and connected with, um, Mike McDorman. He's the chamber director two counties south of us in Clark County, Springfield. And, um, he was, was early on just a really good resource. So I'd say that is find good mentors, find folks that you can look at that accomplish good things, are men and women of integrity and do it well, and learn from them. He put a book in my hands that I'm really excited about because we're actually bringing the author in later this year. Captain Mike Ebershof was a naval captain. He wrote a book called It's Your Ship. If you haven't read that book, it's a gem. He took one of the worst performing ships in the U.S. Navy and in a matter of about 18 months turned it around to the top performing ship in the US Navy. And he relays the management practices that are involved with that of making sure that every individual in your organization owns the organization. So you're not waiting for a command and control, someone to tell you what to do. You're looking out for it and say, well, this is my business. I want it to be successful. So if I see something needs done, well, I'm not gonna wait. I'm just gonna go take care of it. Yeah. So I learned a lot from that. So good mentors, good, good, good books like that. The It's Your Ship was a really impactful one for me. And then ongoing, you need to have outlets and people that to be around you. So I have a group of men that I meet with on Wednesday mornings and you get to share life together. I have another guy that I meet with, try to on once a week. That's a community leader. And we just, we get together and we will just go for a walk., or surround a coffee. Um, as a leader, you have to have someone investing in you and someone looking out for you, asking those questions, hey, how are you doing with this? How's this going at home? Uh, what are you struggling with? Uh, and getting that support because it can be lonely. Uh, you have to make hard decisions and they're not always going to be popular. Um, you, you, you have a lot of weight on your shoulders and you need some of those outlets. So that's been one of the most impactful things for, for my short 4 years here is just having good, good people around you that can ask you tough questions, really check in on you and make sure that you're still heading the right direction.

J**Jason Duff** 52:56

Yeah, that's awesome. Where can people find you and keep up with what's happening with Logan County?

B**Ben Vollrath** 53:01

Yeah, so our website, logancountyohio.com. Hopefully we'll be getting some refresh on that late this year. So you can check us out there. Also contact me anytime, bvolrath@logancountyohio.com. Probably the easiest way is shoot a message over to me. Our chamber is on Facebook too, Logan County Chamber. You can find us on there. That's probably the easiest way to connect to the chamber.

J**Jason Duff** 53:25

Or come to beautiful downtown Bellefontaine and your office is right on the corner of Main and Columbus.

B**Ben Vollrath** 53:31

That's right, two doors down from 600 Downtown Pizza.

J**Jason Duff** 53:34

Grab a pizza, stop in, say hello to Chief.

B**Ben Vollrath** 53:36

I'd love to chat with you.

J**Jason Duff** 53:37

Well, Ben, thank you for being with us today. Um, a few themes that I think that are just important, and one of the things that stood out to me was when you said that entrepreneurs are at the front. And, you know, while you may not look at yourself as an entrepreneur, I— you are in your thinking. And there's this term called intrapreneur for those of those might be working in another company, but the way that they think about things of being innovative and creative and like building their business unit within their company or the organization, that, that is equally important to have those kind of people in the world. But the way that you support people holistically in helping them creating a seat at the table, helping them learn and take skills of learning about governance, volunteering, business skills and knowledge, um, you mentioned the importance of understanding speed, risk, and money. Those are serious opportunities. They're scary to some, but I think working and understanding that your local chamber is an advocate and there to help you. And I think just the, the tips that you mentioned today about all of the incentives and tools that may be available, that many listeners may hopefully picked up some, some great advice from that today. So thank you, thank you so much for sharing.

B**Ben Vollrath** 54:54

Hey, great hanging out with you. I appreciate it, guys.

J**Jason Duff** 54:56

Yeah, no problem. All right, well, uh,

E**Ethan DeLeon** 54:58

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 even the Small Nation YouTube channel. I hope you're able to pull some value out of that conversation, and 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 to 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, guys.