

Episode 20

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SPEAKERS

Jason Duff, Ben Stahler, Ethan DeLeon

B

Ben Stahler 00:00

So if you keep all the cards on the table and you're honest about it, uh, and, and you're open to a dialogue— and as I said, almost all of our efforts, when we're able to say we did contribute, we helped, they were compromises. Jason's pretty good at the ask. Yeah. So he may ask here, and we stopped saying no down here, but we said, well, how about somewhere in the middle?

J

Jason Duff 00:22

I think, you know, it's a good deal when it's a compromise. Yeah, yeah.

E

Ethan DeLeon 00:33

Hey everyone, my name is Ethan DeLeon and I'm here with our founder and CEO of Small Nation, Jason Duff. Joining us on the show today, we have the mayor of Bellefontaine, Ohio, Ben Staller. 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 00:58

Thanks, Ethan. Mayor Staller, welcome to the show today.

B

Ben Stahler 01:02

Thank you for the invitation. It's fabulous to be here.

J**Jason Duff** 01:05

Well, you know, we've had a lot of guests on our show that share a little bit about how Small Nation started and why I'm really excited to have the mayor here today, really from the beginning in Bellefontaine, Ohio, which is a town of 14,000 people in a county that's 46,000. We are the definition of small town. The mayor has served in a number of different capacities over the years. You want to share a little about your public service background?

B**Ben Stahler** 01:31

Sure. I'm a lifelong resident, so I was born in Bellefontaine and did all my schooling right here. Ran off to Ohio Northern University. We share that bond in common. Go Polar Bears! And returned here. I actually was blessed to date my wife all through high school and all through college. So 8 years she put up with me, and, and we said that— we both said I do in the summer of '83. I don't even remember a discussion we had, which you just— you come back home and you get your family started. And so that's what brought us back to the community. She was a teacher and I studied pharmacy at Ohio Northern. And so my pharmacy career then would have spanned I'm retired now, joyfully, uh, but 35 years, and it's almost split down the middle. The first half of that was Mary Rutan Hospital, and that's a very different role as a pharmacist than a retail pharmacist. And so the second half, chapter 2, was CVS Pharmacy, uh, so working in the corporate world but working more one-on-one with customers. And, uh, Sarah and I had a goal We had 3 wonderful kids. They're college grads. They're all out living the dream, working like we are. And after 31 years that we were both in the profession, we retired. Well, I'm 54 at that point. I was actually —

J**Jason Duff** 02:56

Which is young, right?

B**Ben Stahler** 02:58

Yeah. Yeah. In fact, I don't know that anybody's ready to retire at 54, but we thought we were. And well, you know, to add to not just being a pharmacist, but I've been involved in this community in as many things as I could possibly get my hands on. You just say yes to things. A lot of that's volunteering. Yeah. You, you develop, um, you know, kind of a feel for being a part of a board of directors of something or, or doing something better for your community. So at the age of 29, now I'll rewind on you. I, I first ran for city council. I was a councilman for 2 terms. Uh, following that, a year later, I began a stretch of school board, and I was elected 4 times to that. I was on the Career Center, our vocational school. I was on that board for 8 years, a number of other boards. And so been very active in the profession of pharmacy, very active in my community. Now fast forward, we— it's 2014. We both, uh, celebrate, cut the cake. We've retired. I'm actually out east because Hurricane Sandy had hit the coast, and now I'm retired, I can go with some church members and go help repair a home or two. And the phone— my phone is just blowing up, and I'm trying to drywall a house. And that evening I find out that the mayor that preceded me, the young man, had resigned his position. I was also chairing the party. And so it was my job, even from New Jersey, to make some calls and see who would like to be mayor next. And I had a nice list of 5, some of my smart friends, I thought they'd make nice mayors. And really, at that point, it's a handoff. I was calling these folks and saying, it's not even election, if you say you'll have it, you can be mayor for the remainder of this term. And you have to promise to run another time. And everybody was saying back to me, Stahler, why don't you do it? Didn't you just retire? Why are you calling me? Why don't you do it?

J**Jason Duff** 05:06

Well, isn't the mayor position, doesn't it come with a big check and a huge salary in Bellefontaine, Ohio?

B**Ben Stahler** 05:10

Oh, yeah. That's why I was a pharmacist.

J**Jason Duff** 05:16

It does not. It's a thankless job, right?

B**Ben Stahler** 05:19

That's why the young mayor who had 2 children and he was married, he said, I need to, And he has a college degree. He needed to do something else to provide for his family. So I was appointed, that was in '14. I was reelected in '15 and I was reelected in '19. And so I'm now starting my 9th year as mayor. Just a couple quick thoughts. Nothing, maybe life prepares you to be mayor, but nobody, I don't even think you grow up saying, I want to be a mayor, you know, when you're in second grade or something. Maybe a professional baseball player or, you know, maybe a musician or some movie star. Those cool things. A firefighter. Nobody says, I want to go off to be a mayor. But I think life got me ready for this quietly. I didn't even aspire to be mayor when I retired as a pharmacist. So that's what got me here today. So much more I could tell you about how unique it is to be a small city mayor. But I found this, you learn this on the job.

J**Jason Duff** 06:23

Well, we're glad you're in the position because when Small Nation first began, you were serving on city council and, you know, were a member of the community. You know, I think at that time, you know, still kind of in that retirement phase, but wanting to get back and serve. And some massive changes took place in Bellefontaine. At that time about 15 years ago. And, you know, one piece that may help for our listeners about how you got into pharmacy, and you had a family connection with independent pharmacy in downtown Bellefontaine, right?

B**Ben Stahler** 06:55

I do. Of course, our community has this rich 200-year-old history, and I eat that up with a fork and a spoon. But my father's— he was the last co-owner of the pharmacy that actually started in 1875-ish, Dr. Benjamin Brown. And then, and then the next owner of that pharmacy actually employed George Bartholomew, who was a chemist, and who said, I think there's a better way than muddy streets with ruts and horses, and I'm, I've got this idea about creating a paved road. And the rest is history there.

J**Jason Duff** 07:32

But in just a pause on that, yeah, George Bartholomew mixed sand, clay, and marl and invented concrete. I mean, really poured the first paved road. When you come to Bellefontaine, Ohio, we celebrate that in the downtown, and it's a place that people love to get photos and pictures. And I think what's especially cool is it's still used as a street today.

B**Ben Stahler** 07:54

Absolutely. And when people visit, and, and I love to have them stand on the street, I say, I'll, I'll show you new pavement, but then you you reach down, touch this with your hand. This was laid in 1893, and it laid with it by hand and with brooms pounding it down.

J**Jason Duff** 08:10

Yeah.

B**Ben Stahler** 08:11

And we're still driving on it today. So it's a great story for the world of, of concrete and the world of construction for roads. Yeah. So if someone tells you that the road that's not asphalt is made of concrete, it will somehow crumble and disappear, run them down to—

J**Jason Duff** 08:28

we got proof. Come to Bellefontaine. Yeah. But beyond that, after You mentioned George, and then the Insleys operated that pharmacy on Main Street for many years, and then your father.

B**Ben Stahler** 08:40

Right. He was even a soda jerk in the, oh, 1940s when it was Powell Pharmacy, but he was mentored by Merrill Insley, who was really, uh, he was really a cornerstone of Ohio's pharmacists during the '50s, '60s, and '70s. And then my, my dad and Fred Burton bought that from him. They were working with him, and, and of course, that was that nice business transition. And so they were owners from the mid-'70s until about early 2000s. And so, yeah, my father was a business owner. Uh, oddly enough, I loved the profession, but I didn't want to own a store. So I don't have that entrepreneur bug that so much of your team has. But boy, I, uh I feed off of that. I love seeing folks excited about starting a business and watching it grow successfully.

J**Jason Duff** 09:32

That's great. You know, and I think the, the change that has happened on a lot of main streets in small towns is that those cornerstone businesses like the pharmacy, the clothing stores, all of those kinds of shops is what lined Main Street. And then, you know, in the 2000s, the big box corporations, you know, Walmart started citing its locations in Ohio, and a lot of those businesses closed. And the big box pharmacies in our town today, we had 3 of them, the Walgreens, the CVS, the Rite Aids, they ended up purchasing the independents. Did they buy out the family business? I think, was there something involved in that?

B**Ben Stahler** 10:11

Ultimately they did.

J**Jason Duff** 10:12

Ultimately, yeah.

B**Ben Stahler** 10:12

Yeah, Rite Aid actually was the last, the last independent was Family Pharmacy, and Rite Aid bought their scripts. And their inventory. So you don't get a lot, but at least you have your return on investment.

J**Jason Duff** 10:24

And I think that was the door— what, why— that could be devastating to some towns. That also is an opportunity for new investors and new ideas and things to happen. And, and really, when 80% of the first floors of the downtown were, were vacant in the early 2000s, that was an opportunity for investors and entrepreneurs like me to get involved in purchasing. Yeah, that's awesome. So, I mean, that's awesome. We can unpack some of that story, and I feel like a lot of people wonder, you know, how did their downtown get to the point where it is today? So appreciate you guys kind of unpacking some of that history. Um, Mayor, can you explain, uh, just some, you know, 10,000-foot overview of some of the key responsibilities, uh, that a mayor may have in a town, in a town this size?

B**Ben Stahler** 11:10

Sure. Uh, in fact, I think I discovered it overnight. I said, "Yes," thinking I understood all the responsibilities. And it's a very interesting job. So overnight you become a CEO of a small company and we employ 130 full-time employees. Certainly wasn't thinking of that from a management standpoint. I was thinking of all the roles that a successful mayor might have in helping things move along. So 31 police officers, 21 full-time firefighters, paramedics, 15 departments. So, but again, life through city council and school board and just being involved, I understood most of those aspects. So the learning curve was a little shorter for me than someone, because oddly enough, a community can actually vote anybody to be their mayor as more of a popularity contest. But are they really suited for the job? That's why I just, I had to pray about it. My family said, give it a shot. Well, now today, starting my 9th year, it feels like a comfortable pair of shoes. I enjoy the role. I can certainly take the, you take some interesting calls.

J**Jason Duff** 12:24

Do you take any heat?

B**Ben Stahler** 12:27

I take some heat. Oftentimes it's, and again, here's what life teaches you, listen to them and they may be really upset, So let them vent, return with empathy, you know, say, I get it. And sometimes my answer is, actually, that has nothing to do with the city of Bellefontaine. And I really, I get some really odd things. A couple other thoughts. Well, yeah, I feel very comfortable being at events. And so I'm invited to, my calendar is just filled with things where people say, hey, Mayor, would you come to our fill in the blank. And my answer is, if my calendar is open, I say yes. I think that's what a mayor should do. But each mayor, whether it's this town or some other town, they can, they can decide whether they're too busy for that. And, and I— it just fits. Again, it's pretty comfortable. I've officiated about 100 marriages. Oh, I didn't realize I would help people become married. So there's lots of things, uh, but I'd say about half of my week is either appointments or being away from the office. Another half is actually managing. But the structure is I have a city manager and I have an executive secretary, and so they keep me organized and communicate with me. And so I can, I can be on the road. I was in Chicago a few days ago, but I can— you can manage everything from your phone. I can reply to your email and your text and take a call. And, um, so it happens because there's a team. And team is so important to what we can talk about with small nation and Bellefontaine's growth. It's a team.

J**Jason Duff** 14:06

Yeah. So on those marriages, have you looked back on the statistics? How many of them are still married? I'm hoping that success statistic is high.

B**Ben Stahler** 14:16

I am too. I don't follow up. I'm unaware. No, I'm aware of one or two, but like I said, my character—

J

Jason Duff 14:23

Your track record's good.

B

Ben Stahler 14:24

It's pretty good. Okay. That's all we need to know. I also, it's old school of me, but if, If you two were to be married, and I don't know if you're holding hands or anything, but—

J

Jason Duff 14:32

Well, it's really gonna get interesting. I'm married, Jason, sorry. Darn it, darn it.

B

Ben Stahler 14:37

So please come into my office and visit with me for about 10 minutes because most of the people that I will officiate, I don't know them. And so I'll say, well, what's your story? You know, how did you meet? Tell me something funny about one another. What's your plans from here? Do you work? Do you have children? And then we say the "I dos." And the other funny thing is these are total strangers, and there's a point in a quick ceremony—it only takes about 10 minutes—where I ask if you'll take somebody for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health. I think it's at that point. I'm thinking, that's a big commitment, and I get choked up, and I don't even know them. So it is special to be able to officiate weddings. So yeah, that's awesome.

J**Jason Duff** 15:24

And you kind of, you know, hinted to it earlier, but what are some of the examples that you have worked with Small Nation to get something done? Because I know that's— we, we don't really have many. Oh, I'm sure. Yeah. Can I tell you, part of the DNA when we first started was bringing ideas and, and, you know, changes to the town that have never been done before. And I think for a lot of people listening that is kind of the first step. It's like, well, I've been traveling to this other state or this other city and seeing new ideas, and I'd love to bring some of these back home. Yeah. What can be hard with that is change is difficult. It's hard for people to see what the vision is because it's uncomfortable. And, and so it's easy to say no to something because that's viewed a lot of times as the safe bet. So When we first started, I remember one Board of Zoning Appeals meeting that we were changing the color of the front of the facade for one of our storefronts. And there was some rules around that the facade needed to be wood, and we were proposing to use this facade stone. And there were a few folks in town that were a part of a committee that said that that was not historic. And that that look was not appropriate. And we went to a Board of Zoning Appeals meeting, and there, one of the very impassioned committee members actually cried at the meeting because they were so upset about the stone. Now, this is what's neat about history and time as it passes. Now that everything is installed and put together, I actually— this, the same person that was so frustrated and, and passionate of hating the stone walks up and down the streets and comments how beautiful the streetscape is today. That's cool. And so, you know, at the time, I think at the beginning it's those— you've got to have like-minded minds and leaders that help communicate, soften, explain what those changes are. But what oftentimes when you first get started, you have to understand there are ordinances. Ordinances are rules and codes that govern the operation of the city. And just like when the mayor was describing the there are different city departments. It may be related to utilities. You're going to need water and sewer to your property. If it's not there, how do we get it there? There's an engineering department in the city. Oftentimes the engineering department helps with permits. Where do you get a zoning permit? Where do you get a building permit? And then when you do get those things established, you're going to want to, you know, work with the city on promoting what you're doing, you know, sharing the great things of your new business or your building or a project. And so We in the beginning, when you're the outsider coming in, it can be very difficult to build those relationships. The great thing about a small town is that you can get access to the mayor. Like I can walk into his office. Yeah, like he said, he may not be around, but you can text and call him. Do you know how many other communities rare it is that you actually have the cell phone number for the mayor? And I think that was the difference as we were getting started. We were bringing new ideas that were pretty big and bold that made some people uncomfortable, but we had to work with the governing bodies of the city to make changes that would permit and allow these big, bold ideas to be tested and which today we're really proud of have worked.

B**Ben Stahler** 18:58

It could be from signs. You have brought some really interesting signs. But there were ordinances that said how tall, how high, how far out of the building. But ordinances can be changed and they have been. Parking has always been an issue. We're always looking to improve that. I think Small Nation came to us and said, wait a minute, now we have an opportunity to have lunch, maybe have your hair done, shop for antiques, go to some of our boutiques. You can't get it done in 2 hours. So we lengthen the parking. The free parking. We only encourage patrons to be out in front. Jason, I think of so many examples, and I'm looking around the studio and I see some of them are hanging on the wall. One of them was Jason came to us and said, what would you think about outdoor eating, the patio? And what people take for granted is the sidewalk that if— so if you're out in front of Flying Pepper Cantina or 600, the sidewalk is actually still ours. We don't lease it to a small nation. We don't get a penny for it, but we did enter into an agreement and we said, well, this is a good idea. By the way, it wasn't always a good idea when he first brings it to us.

J**Jason Duff** 20:10

Well, can we pause on that a little bit? Because I do appreciate when we first kind of proposed, you know, outdoor dining in the public right away. These are the kind of things that are legitimate concerns and criticisms that will come up. Is there's not enough parking in our downtown already. Yeah. And I don't care if you built 14 parking garages, there would still be people saying there's not enough parking. The, the other thing is, is a lot of these restaurants have liquor licenses. So allowing liquor to be served in the public right away, that's, uh, you know, a concern. Yeah. And then the other thing is, who is going to be paying for these improvements? So if we're adding concrete patio or railing or fencing, the public's not going to be paying for that, right? So we had to kind of hear what those criticisms were, and I did really want to compliment the mayor. Like, he hears a lot of criticism. I mean, and, and you, you do want to— and that's the same thing. I listen to the person that hated my stone choice. I tried to understand and have empathy with why she was so impassioned about that. But I also showed examples and renderings and why we need to innovate and change. We need that fresh perspective, color look. We can still be historic, but we can innovate. And I think the patio space was, if you own an independent restaurant in a small town, you want to maximize your revenue potential so that restaurant stays around. And so we had to be creative of using the existing historic building stock that we had, But how can we create those front living spaces? There's a reason why there are front porches on homes. It creates a sense of community where you want to walk and see your neighbors and have a conversation and connect. And, you know, I think in the beginning there was a lot of discernment. I want to picture a young Jason walking into the city building and making all these requests.

B**Ben Stahler** 22:09

And I don't know why—

J**Jason Duff** 22:11

I want to walk us through that. Don't you think there were moments you were pretty— you were skeptical as well.

B**Ben Stahler** 22:13

Have you ever heard him say that no is only a delay delayed response to a yes. Have you? Just about every week, yes. Okay, good. Yeah, well, it's true. I hate to admit that. No, Jason came to us about City Sweets and Creamery and said, Mayor, can we just make that street, that alleyway, go one way? And it's like, well, now I'm thinking of the criticism we'll get. But we worked with that. And then he said, it's actually not high enough. Do you mind if we raise the alley? And I'm thinking, raising an alley? But it made sense because you're handing a hot cup of coffee, or the associate inside has to bend down to just barely get out the window. So that worked. Um, gosh.

J**Jason Duff** 22:58

And I think that's an example too, in a lot of towns. I think that some of these decisions are actually made within a few days, not a few weeks or a few months or a few years. I mean, I think that's when other people from other towns are coming, like, how are you getting this done with the And I think part of the key is, is always about relationship, but the second thing is, is really increasing your communication, getting the right people around the issue. And I do think that's a leadership thing, is that if there's something that needs to be discussed, the mayor will call a meeting and bring the engineer, bring, you know, the zoning representative, bring the code enforcement office, hear out what is to be proposed, and And then questions are asked, then it's discussed. Yeah. And then they go back to their departments and their team and say, let's run this by the law director, right? Let's run this by city council. And then we're going to make a decision because in business, speed is everything. And I think that's the other thing that is a, is a key for success for what's happening here in Bellefontaine. We are doing it faster and we're doing it better than most.

B**Ben Stahler** 24:07

And that's where a municipality— and oftentimes we'll get a call, somebody's visited Bellefontaine, or Small Nation has gone to another community. Well, I get a follow-up call and they say, is this for real? And I say, yeah, you can do one of two or three things, but one is see where you can help them. But remember, you want to help anybody that comes in your door. The second is how can you get out of the way, or how can you speed things up, or who on your team can help with resources without burdening the city's budget. And so I think we've done all of that and we've got a little piece of almost all the projects. Yeah. The post office. Can we spend one minute on that? The post office was a federal building that was built 100 years ago, a little over that. And the last memory I have was it was a restaurant, Mexican restaurant. It was— someone owned it several decades ago and then it went through some change of hands. This guy would buy it, that group would buy it, and then they realized it really needed a lot more loving care. Mm-hmm. And then some. But it got to the point in our community that it probably sat empty for a couple of decades. The roof had fallen in, the windows were broken. People could actually get in and out of that building. Now it's a safety concern. We were saving up somewhere in the neighborhood of \$140,000 to \$150,000 to tear it down, which brings a tear to my eye.

J**Jason Duff** 25:31

Yeah, beautiful building.

B**Ben Stahler** 25:32

We had worked on it for, I don't know, a year, year and a half. We were closing in on 2 years. We were days away from a wrecking ball coming to town. And Jason comes into the office and says— he lays his body across the railroad tracks. It wasn't that bad. I'm being dramatic. Yeah. But he said, I want to save that building there. And I'm like, are you kidding me? You know?

J**Jason Duff** 25:55

And I think you said you looked at your watch. You said we are in the final hour. We've got to make some bold moves if we're going to do this.

B**Ben Stahler** 26:01

And we did. And Jason took ownership. We inked a one-page agreement. Jason said, I will fix the roof, I'll put windows in it, I'll secure the building, we'll clean up. We went and helped him clean up the building. So it looked good from the outside. It's a beautiful building. In fact, we gave Small Nation— I don't know, gave, but we pitched into the project. And it wasn't that we— I think it was \$20,000 or \$30,000. But remember, it was going to cost us \$140,000 to tear down. And so the few people that would grumble about, well, you're helping someone, I said, no, they saved your community and even some state dollars from coming in and tearing down a handsome building. Now, today it doesn't have its final place in history, but it will. I'm excited about that. We had a building that caught fire and you bought that from the owner. And that was a sad story. It was a jewelry store. And I don't know whether you look at these with rose-colored glasses, but you saw potential in this this terribly burnt, smoky building. And Jason said, "Well, you know, once we do the work, there's some insurance money that was supposed to come back to the owner." He said, "Why don't we do that? Why don't we release that now?" Well, that was actually not in the rules. And yet we knew that helped with equity. We knew he was going to spend so much more than that. It was a few thousand dollars. And so again, you used to have to dismiss Jason and think about it for a day. And then we say it's a fabulous idea or we'll compromise. A lot of A lot of what you have asked us, it's never black or white. It's something gray in between. And that's how we have a little piece of whether it's to close an alley for a week or can we park a dumpster so we can tear things out of a building. So many things that we're proud of the relationship.

J**Jason Duff** 27:53

It's the people and the stories along the way. And the post office is a great example. We were at the last hour, and there were other elected officials that hired consultants that said the building was not architecturally significant. And, you know, there's a lot of money in towns and communities to tear buildings down, but to save them— and once you, once you tear them down, they're gone. Yeah. And that's the thing, the evolution of Bellefontaine. Buildings like the historic Camby Building were on the chopping block, and it's still here. It's not occupied with a tenant yet, but it's in a placeholder that as the other buildings around it get full, it's a strong development potential for the next iteration of what Bellefontaine will be ready for. And you've got to get the economics right. And I think that's the other thing where I appreciate working with the city is these types of renovation projects take massive amounts of capital and it's very hard to excite and get investors building upper floor housing, taking the risk to put in an independent restaurant. So the more things that we can do to help to say we want to make this easier to find a place for your dumpster or find a place where people are going to park or getting the signage right so people know where your business is. Those are those, those things that speed up to say, I want to invest more there because I have a partner that understands that when private enterprise and business wins, the city wins as well. What are some of those common questions that we get from other city leaders and mayors that we get coming in for a tour or something? What are some of those common FAQs and, you know, the relationship between the city and a private partner potentially? Yeah, I think people comment to me, and I'd love to hear the mayor's perspective on this, is, is that How has this happened so quickly? You know, 56 buildings, you know, seeing this, just these massive changes. You go back on Google Street View and look at how boarded up and bad, like, how have all those, those changes happened? And the stories like City Sweets and Creamery, yeah, to recruit a new bakery to the downtown when you've got McDonald's and Dunkin' Donuts and Tim Hortons, so you can name all the chains that have drive-throughs. If we want to get a bakery that can compete with them at that level, having a drive-up window is essential. Now when you take that to your partner in your city, they're like, they point to the ordinances, to the maps. Yeah, but I think the, the innovation way, and this is a big credit to the mayor and his team, is they said, well, let's do a study. And the study is as simple, let's put out the traffic meter to see how many cars actually use that. What was the result of that? That test? Do you remember? It wasn't many. I think it was, was it 4 or 5 a day? It wasn't as much that we were all thinking.

B**Ben Stahler** 30:59

And we do those in the dark of night because we don't want someone who's either pro or con to skew the numbers. And so there have been a number, we have one right now that we're using the numbers for the Vivian, and we badly need— the community needs space for different venues, whether it's a wedding reception or meetings or what have you. So we're excited to help with that project, but that also involves an alleyway. And we— you have— you can have a hunch, you could stand there for an hour or two and see nobody drive through, but you really want to get a true traffic count, and you don't want to tell the community that you're doing it. Although if you're clever, you can kind of see these small devices on both sides of the alley. But yeah, because you want data to share with your community. Again, you'll never make everybody happy, but we try to be prepared for the pushback. And sometimes we'll get pushback because Jason and the team have so many more projects than other owners. There's some one-offs and some two-offs. But when they say to us, it seems like you're helping small nation, I just return fire and say, how can I help you? What can I do to help you with your project? It gets quiet after that because it takes courage and it takes vision and it takes capital, as you said.

J**Jason Duff** 32:28

Mayor, what would be some advice that you might give to other city leaders that might be listening to this podcast wondering how they might be able to work with a private partner? Whether it could— I mean, you could take it any way. You could say, how do I find a private partner? Or, you know, how do I engage one that they know are already existing?

B**Ben Stahler** 32:46

You know, right now we have a great example. We have private investors who are taking a chance on our next hotel because we badly need a hotel. And so when people feel the need and have some equity and find it's going to be a worthwhile investment and not just flushing money down the drain. So some of it is just shaping the narrative. Um, I don't know, Jason, how would you add to that?

J**Jason Duff** 33:13

Well, I, I think it's asking the question and being open. I love when the mayor said, part of my job is just reduce the friction. Yeah, it's just get out of the way. So, um, I, I think coming into a town that is willing to listen and then connect you to resources is immensely helpful. Um, part of it is the sport of customer service. It's like, we, we want our town to grow and to win. And I think there's, there's these examples of a lot of towns that are growing too fast. So you have to balance the type of growth and the things that you want. But if you have people that are you know, really committed to bringing the types of development and housing and industry that you want. The question is, how do we reduce those, those barriers? Yeah. Um, the other thing is really understanding how development benefits your city. And I, I don't know if people understand, the economics really drive so much that's happening in our world. And if you want great parks departments, great fire department, great police, it takes money. And can you maybe speak just with, when you think about what the downtown was, you know, 10, 15 years ago to what it is today, what does that mean economically to the city?

B**Ben Stahler** 34:43

Well, most municipalities operate off of income tax dollars where county governments off of real estate. And so really the only way— there are two ways. It's almost a simple model. I could be telling third graders this. You're either going to increase the number of people working or living in your community. Now you have more potential for income, but they've got to be working, not necessarily retirees. And you've got to— well, we had to provide more housing. So that's what builds that up. Or you increase the rate of taxation. And we are, you know, we're boastful that we only charge 1.3%. There may be some levies around the corner, and here I am, you know, now started looking at my third term. And, um, but we're talking about that, but it's something the community would vote on and they would say we're all in. It could be parks, it could be, it could be these beautification, but at some point you do get capped out with dollars. And so you have to turn to the community and say, what about this idea? And then you have to help sell it. I don't mean sugarcoat it. I mean sell it. And back to your question, Ethan, if a mayor in another community reaches out to me, it's hard to explain how to tell somebody else to keep an open mind. And I can only tell them by example that I would say 8 or 9 years ago when Jason would come with his first few ideas and he had no examples behind that. Yeah. They were theories. Yeah. Man, I had to open— you could hear the rusty hinges. I was opening the doors to my mind. Now he's got examples not only here but in other communities that they've helped or that even have other examples. We love to borrow from other examples, but if you're open to looking how it worked for somewhere else, then give it a try. And that's when folks will call us. They'll say, small nation for real? And I say, yes, they are. And I say, just, just dip your foot in the pool. Choose a building, choose a project that would benefit you greatly, you know, fits into your plan. Yeah. And, and see where you can either help or get out of the way.

J**Jason Duff** 36:56

Yeah, that's a great point. Appreciate you sharing that. And just to comment, the income tax is again funding, uh, city government. The other thing that relates to counties, to schools, is as real estate gets improved, those, those taxes then go back to the community. Now, you're right, the, the city doesn't typically get a big cut of that. That's going to the school districts, that's going to support, you know, levies and county initiatives that are in by voters. But the thing that I'm probably most proud of is, you know, there's been massive amounts of capital invested to improve these properties. And then when you improve the properties, that's going to benefit real estate taxes. But the other methods, all of these businesses hire employees. So if your restaurants, they have staff, they're getting charged income tax. And if the businesses are profitable, the, the, the income from those businesses is taxed as well. So what's really powerful about starting this movement, not only is it increasing the number of people living in your community, it's increasing the number of people that are employed in your community. It's increasing the property values. All of that cycle starts to have an impact on the health of the local economy.

B**Ben Stahler** 38:07

What also happens is now you look back in all of the improvements and you can ask an average resident or a visitor walking down the street, they want to spend their money here. Where I'm thinking the mindset 10 years ago was you just simply got in your car and you ran over to Dublin or Columbus or a mall. And now there are so many options here for eating and for shopping and just being outside. By the way, we added a DORA, the Designated Outdoor Refreshment. That was a new concept for us, but it also weaves in about why not have a beer or wine while you're shopping in one of our many shops. So I think that's another economic impact of— it's easier now to say shop local.

J**Jason Duff** 38:54

Yeah. That's awesome. And the partners that happen in the community, and many of our previous guests have been a head of their chamber or their economic development. You know, we've heard there are various levels of government that have that private-public partnership. And I don't think we can diminish how important the Chamber of Commerce is and economic development and tourism. You interact with that team regularly.

B**Ben Stahler** 39:20

Weekly. And it's like a three-legged stool. So you need The investment, you need Ben Vollrath and his team out there looking for opportunities, grant funding. We love if Ohio is noticing us, we're also getting some funding that helps our community. It's also a multiplier. As the good news rolls, so do some of the support dollars come in from outside our community.

J**Jason Duff** 39:44

How are you thinking about innovating? So when you look at your role and knowing how Cities are changing, governments are changing. What are some of the things that you're thinking about to prepare Bellefontaine for the future?

B**Ben Stahler** 39:57

Part of it is connectivity. We're also working so hard because I'm not really sure who else should take on the cheerleader role of we need more housing. And so we're really working on that because if you love this community but you're visiting or you work here but you drive back home, we'd rather that you lived here. And so it's been a challenge because geographically we're an hour from Columbus, we're an hour from Dayton, and the major home builders are in those markets. They're also driving past the Jerome Villages, the Marysvilles, where the dollar value on a house is higher. So it's been a challenge, but we're really reaping finally the relationships. And, and the, you know, we've been casting our net now for a number of years, we built some economic development tools to actually relieve even a one-off home builder of the real estate taxes that they'll experience in those first 5, 6, 7 years. Those incentives are starting to pay us back and we're getting some traction.

J**Jason Duff** 40:59

That's awesome. As Jason mentioned, we had some previous guests and I'm excited here in this lineup. We've had someone from we had Ben Volrath, you know, with the chamber, and we had someone, you know, it kind of deals with our, our state legislation, um, the chairman of JobsOhio. Yeah. And, and so some of these higher, um, you know, public partner or private-public relationships that we've gotten to explore. And so I'm excited to, you know, explore this with you, um, here at the local level as well. Um, but you talked about, and we've talked about this in other episodes, is that inevitably there's some friction, right? So what are some of the ways that specifically the two of you have found that to work past some of that friction, work through it? Because this kind of stuff doesn't happen overnight, right? It's taken a long time to see some of these success stories that you see around the room.

B**Ben Stahler** 41:52

I think it starts with we're both local and we have both— we're blessed with really good families. In fact, I remember when Jason came into the world. I was dear friends with his mother and father, loved his grandparents, so I know family. But typically, these are just cornerstones of good living, is that you don't want to tell a story in one room and then the story changes as you go to the next room or who you meet with. So if you keep all the cards on the table and you're honest about it and you're open to a dialogue, and as I said, almost all of our efforts, when we're able to say we did contribute, we helped, they were compromises. Jason's pretty good at the ask. Yeah. So he may ask here, and we stopped saying no down here, but we said, well, how about somewhere in the middle?

J**Jason Duff** 42:39

I think, you know, it's a good deal when it's a compromise.

B**Ben Stahler** 42:42

Yeah. Yeah. Because it's open, though, and honest. Honest and open, uh, gets you to the end of the compromise.

J**Jason Duff** 42:48

The thing about governance, and that's what's so important, is that having a city council, having a chamber board— I mean, you need various minds that will look at an issue and have different perspectives. But it takes someone that's going to galvanize and activate that decision. And I think part of the mayor being an executive— I'm an executive— he used that role as being CEO of the city. That's what he does. We have to kind of take those groups or those bodies and then make a decision. And I think that's hard because some communities' decisions get stuck in layers of governance, and you can't design a brochure with a committee. Like, it, it gets stuck and there's too many perspectives and someone says, well, I don't like this color and I don't like that font. Like, it's always helpful when you can have someone, a professional, drive the idea, get the feedback from the various groups, but then a decision has to be made and we're going to go do it. And there's an inherent level of huge amount of trust that has to be established. There's also an inherent amount of risk. And I think that's where coming into a new town or new community, I think it's real important that you establish a track record. And it could be just establishing an upfront contract that we met today. I promise I'll email you these materials, these resources. And if I do that, will you follow up with the decision or feedback to me by that date? That very basic test, when that's accomplished, trust starts to be established. And then once, you know, you get a track record, then people can point and the confidence level is a little easier to say, we've done this project and this project and it turned out great versus a lot of big rosy big pictures. And you've heard a lot— how many pitches over the years of we're going to build this, we're going to do this, and then it doesn't happen? Yeah. Awesome. Thank you for kind of— I like just getting that perspective because that's the reality of it too. And you know, I don't want, um, I don't know, we talk about a lot of the successes on this podcast, but there's a real life element to it too, and I want it to be valuable for, you know, our listeners. So if you're trying to make a change in your community and, you know, this is inspiring to you, know that you have to, you know, include everyone on the conversation and build that trust, kind of what you were saying. Like, it's easier to say yes to something now, or, you know, or come to a to a conclusion when you have all these previous projects to back it up. So thank you both for just chiming in on that. As we kind of, you know, we're around 45 minutes here, as we kind of wrap it up here, what are some of the professional development resources such as books, podcasts, courses, or anything that helped you along your journey and your professional journey?

B**Ben Stahler** 45:38

I think professional associations. And so I'm involved, and in fact, Next year, I didn't throw that out in my intro, I'm chairman of Ohio's Mayors Association. Awesome. So I've been involved with mayors across the state, and I guess I've earned their trust to go to the front of the room for one year. Congratulations. But it's a huge untapped, often, resource is to reach out to other mayors and see if they, especially mayors of a similar size or demographics, we don't necessarily go to the mayor of Columbus Columbus. And of course, Delaware and Union County have both grown so fast that they may have answers to how they solve things, but they also have a little more money to throw at it. It's a little bit different. So I try to see who also walks a mile in my shoes. And so I've got a network of that. We have, of course, the other mayors in Logan County are of villages, but we also gather together. So we have a Logan County Mayors Association. We're with the commissioners several times a month, economic development every week. I think you just stay in touch. And Columbus, you said you actually sat with JP Nassif?

J**Jason Duff** 46:55

So we had the chairman of the board. He's the executive director or the CEO. The chairman of the board is Bob Smith. Bob Smith was our guest.

B**Ben Stahler** 47:05

And you interviewed him. That's fantastic. But One Columbus is a great resource. Mid-Ohio Regional Planning, MORPC is their acronym. We meet with them monthly, actually. And so there's a 3-county, that's the Logan Union-Champaign Planning Commission. There are numerous resources and we're all in it to win, really. If Ohio wins, we all win. Yeah. If Central Ohio wins, we're a part of that, thankfully, West Central Ohio., right down to our own backyard of West Liberty or Indian Lake, or we're even working towards something for East Liberty. All boats rise if we can help one another. And so there are a lot of resources. It's not hard. And as Jason said, maybe I should change my cell phone because, yeah, everybody can call me and it's on my business card. It's like, that's my cell. And so I have to watch out for that. But, um, yeah, I can sit and we could be in a meeting, and you think of a great question, and I know it's rude to text during a meeting, but I'm gonna get your answer in about 2 minutes, 'cause I text the guy or gal who ought to know the answer to that. And so it is fun, and that's what being 62, I've built up some resources and a few phone numbers. You can do the same thing, Jason, and that's how you just, and we know if we text each other in the evening, we're probably having dinner or drinks with somebody, but they ask a great question about development, or they ask something about the history of Bellefontaine, and we just tap each other and we just go ahead and answer it because it helps someone else finish that thought or that sentence.

J**Jason Duff** 48:39

Mayor Stuller, Bellefontaine was just voted on 2023 and 2000— 2022, 2023 as Ohio's Best Hometown. First off, congratulations on that. What are you most proud of when you think of the city of Bellefontaine?

B**Ben Stahler** 48:54

Wow, I think so many people really own that success, uh, and we tried to— as we said, we're even planning an event in November.

J**Jason Duff** 49:04

It's gonna be a big party.

B**Ben Stahler** 49:06

Yeah, when you start to plan a party and then you think, who do we thank? Well, the list is too long because, yeah, everybody has a little piece in this and that history that got us here. You were— it was fun to go back into the 1800s and the early 1900s. And there were downtown businesses then. They had a different approach though to it. And as you said, it evolved and things got quiet when the businesses went out of town and went big box. And thank goodness for the resurgence. But I think that's why we're getting noticed. I think that's what gives us a character and flavor. And again, it's a proud moment for all of us. Certainly, I get to be in front of the room to say thank you, but it's, it's, it's on behalf of everybody.

J**Jason Duff** 49:52

The creativity, the innovation, the, the momentum that's happening here, and that's a reason why we're excited to celebrate Best Hometown. But I think this, this podcast, I leave the golden nugget, it kind of summarizes that your partnerships, the relationships, the speed, and then establishing that track record, you know, showing people that your vision, even if it's something small, that you commit to do something, follow up and do it. And when that relationship and that contract has been filled, that is the beginning for so many new, incredible, awesome things to come. Yeah, that's really good. Thank you. Um, where can people follow you and keep up with what's happening with the city?

B**Ben Stahler** 50:36

I think it's easy just anymore through either social media. I'm very, uh, You probably get tapped that way too. But of course, if you Google the City of Bellefontaine, our website should come up. My phone number's there, my email address. I find interesting through the course of a week how sometimes total strangers find a way to reach you, and they'll go through an email. I think, well, I didn't give you my email address. What's— it's on the— yeah, it's on the web. And so I would just Google the City of Bellefontaine and and reach out because, uh, come visit, right?

J**Jason Duff** 51:10

Come, come to our town. We'll give you a tour. We'll show it off.

B**Ben Stahler** 51:14

We do it all the time and we want to do it more. Yeah, awesome. Thank you for the invitation.

J**Jason Duff** 51:18

Absolutely. All right, well,

E**Ethan DeLeon** 51:20

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