

Episode 36

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Statewide development, Ohio Department of Development, economic development, Lydia Mihalik, public-private partnerships, small town investment, water and wastewater improvements, community grants, Team Ohio, Bellefontaine, rural revitalization, state incentives, workforce development, local government, Findlay

SPEAKERS

Jason Duff, Lydia Mihalik, Ethan DeLeon

- L Lydia Mihalik** 00:00
We had \$250 million for water and wastewater improvements. Nobody's ever— first of all, that's definitely not sexy, and nobody wants to talk about water and wastewater.
- J Jason Duff** 00:11
Yeah.
- L Lydia Mihalik** 00:11
But these are all areas in which we've tried to be partners with local communities. And quite frankly, the smaller ones, small to mid-sized communities, are the ones that benefit the most.
- E Ethan DeLeon** 00:31
Hey everyone, my name is Ethan DeLeon and I'm here with our founder and CEO of Small Nation, Jason Duff. Today we are honored to have the director of Ohio Department of Development, Lydia Mihalik, on the show. 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** 00:55
Thank you, Ethan. Director Mihalik, welcome to the show.
- L Lydia Mihalik** 00:59
Thank you. Gosh, Ethan, I need a voice like that.
- J Jason Duff** 01:02
He's kind of got a natural— people say that I have a, uh, a voice for not radio, maybe. So, you know, it's — we, we practice and we get better, right? Yeah. I say it's all the microphones. I always hate my, my voice on any recording, but it's the microphones.

L

Lydia Mihalik 01:19

Yeah, okay, we'll go with that.

J

Jason Duff 01:21

Well, welcome back to Bellefontaine.

L

Lydia Mihalik 01:22

Oh, thank you. I love it here.

J

Jason Duff 01:24

Well, it means a lot to us. I think we had you in town probably about a year a half ago, and wow, as I look back at what the state has accomplished in the last year, you should feel pretty darn proud.

L

Lydia Mihalik 01:37

Oh, I do. You know, look, the governor and lieutenant governor and #TeamOhio has done a great job, and look, we've got a tremendous state that we are very, very proud of, and we, I think the lieutenant governor likes to say, when preparation meets opportunity, that's when success happens. So, I love that. You all are doing great and we love to talk about it.

J

Jason Duff 02:03

Appreciate that. Yeah. Well, you know, a lot of people, when they talk about Ohio on the national level, a few years ago, the term flyover state would come up. I know, right? And for all of us that live here or are from the Midwest, like, I always challenge people like, well, actually, have you been to that part of the country? And there's like these stereotypes or these beliefs, but you're shattering, you and Team Ohio are shattering a lot of those beliefs.

L

Lydia Mihalik 02:31

Well, right. I mean, look, I think when people actually come here and they see what's happening, it's very dynamic. We're knocking it out of the park, as they say, and it's an exciting time. It's Ohio's time. And look, I think we're shining a spotlight on it. The real action is happening in communities like Bellefontaine. And it's just, it's really cool to be a part of.

J

Jason Duff 03:02

Appreciate that. And, you know, part of your background and story of how you got started, you're originally not from Ohio, but you found Ohio.

L

Lydia Mihalik 03:10

I did.

J

Jason Duff 03:11

I did. Tell us about that.

L

Lydia Mihalik 03:12

Yeah. So I'm actually from Indiana, so I'm an adopted Buckeye. Hey, it still counts. It does, right? So, you know, when basketball season rolls around, I still root for my Hoosiers.

J

Jason Duff 03:24

Okay.

L

Lydia Mihalik 03:25

Bad night last night.

J

Jason Duff 03:27

Oh yeah, a lot of brackets that are frustrated.

L

Lydia Mihalik 03:29

Bracket busters. But so yeah, I actually was born in Syracuse, Indiana, and I came to Ohio to study at the University of Findlay, played basketball there. I'm sitting down, so you can't tell whether or not I was a point guard or a forward. In my mind, I was a point guard, but I wasn't really.

J

Jason Duff 03:51

And you were like a very accomplished basketball player.

L

Lydia Mihalik 03:55

Well, in my mind.

J

Jason Duff 03:56

Well, yeah. At University of Findlay, I think you guys had some records, right?

L

Lydia Mihalik 04:01

Okay. Yeah. Yeah. So I played basketball, I studied political science, and I fell in love with the city of Findlay.

J

Jason Duff 04:09

And can I ask why?

L

Lydia Mihalik 04:12

You know, what's interesting is that, so I grew up in a really, really small town. Smaller than here. And Findlay was a place where, you know, I could explore and I wasn't really afraid of it, but it was still big for me. Yeah. And so it was quaint, it was supportive, it was a great supportive community. Being a member of the women's basketball team afforded me a lot of opportunity to, to do things. And created a lot of relationships. I just, I, it was fun, and I learned a lot at the University of Findlay. And what I would say is that my education there, I mean, my professors had, you know, had, you know, some great experiences and education from places like Duke and Lehigh and the University of Michigan. And, you know, political science departments like that are few and far between. And so, you know, my ability to— I learned very quickly how to come about opinions and to argue your point. Yeah. And just be real open and receptive to things. And, you know, I credit, you know, where I am now and how I look at things to my education at the University of Findlay. I love that community.

J

Jason Duff 05:53

Was that where you got to interact with other leaders? And were you in situations on the university where you were put into leadership opportunities or learned about leadership?

L

Lydia Mihalik 06:05

You know, it's— sure. I would say, you know, I did not plan on you know, being in a leadership position as I was going through college. I think, you know, having, having the opportunity to be in athletics at a higher level certainly helped me hone those skills. Um, you know, I got an internship with the city of Findlay my junior year of college, um, and like, was like in community and economic development. And I fell in love with local government. I had no idea.

J

Jason Duff 06:43

What was it that— what was the romance?

L

Lydia Mihalik 06:46

Well, first of all, you're so close to people and serving people and figuring out what actually goes on behind the scenes. I think a lot of people go through life and they have little to no interaction with their local government. And they're like, "Meh, okay." When I turn on the water in the morning to brush my teeth or when I flush the toilet, it, you know, all of that just happens. Like, it's just some magic.

J

Jason Duff 07:10

There's like a water fairy until something goes wrong.

L

Lydia Mihalik 07:12

That's right, that's right. Until something goes wrong. Yeah, the streets that you drive on, you know, the traffic lights, um, the, the public safety services that you come to rely on. I think a lot of people are just like, ah, that stuff just is there, right? And they don't recognize that there's actually a whole operation that is, that is behind the scenes that goes into to making all of that work.. And I was so amazed at all of those things. And I just, um, within months I was like, oh no, I love this. This is pretty cool stuff. And I got really lucky. And, you know, I did that internship my junior year and my senior year, and then Mayor Stozik offered me a job as I was graduating. And I was like, oh yeah.

J

Jason Duff 07:57

What was that entry-level position there for you?

L

Lydia Mihalik 07:59

It was that being a zoning administrator. And it was \$27,000 a year.

J

Jason Duff 08:06

So as a zoning administrator, you had a chance to work on the zoning code, help enforce the zoning code.

L

Lydia Mihalik 08:13

It was great. Dilapidated structures were my thing. Oh yeah, they were my jam.

J

Jason Duff 08:18

Do you keep that on your resume today? I don't, I don't. Well, you know what's interesting of being in the rule enforcing, uh, role, and now you're kind of on the developing role today— no, that's, that's That's a thing.

L

Lydia Mihalik 08:34

It was really funny. I think I was somewhere at an event. I don't know, it was maybe a couple of months ago. And there was a bunch of like code enforcement officials. And I was like, oh yeah. I said, you know, when I was first— when I first started in my professional career, I did like, you know, plan review and site plan review. And it was in front of the City Planning Commission all of the time. I was like, so I speak your language, like I know how this works. And they're like, are you kidding? And I was like, no, no, no, I'm—

J

Jason Duff 09:08

and as a developer, by being able to speak that language, it allows you to bridge. And I think that sometimes that negotiation or that mediation, you know, it's important that you have zoning codes and rules because that protects property values. But you know, there are some bad actors that we as developers and, yeah, you know, being responsible for community. We want to protect our communities from those things. So it is— that's neat that you have that, that experience.

L

Lydia Mihalik 09:37

There's something to be said for actually being in the field. And when you're sitting across from someone asking, uh, them to do something, if you actually know what that is or you've been there and you understand what they're doing, there's a respect.

J

Jason Duff 09:53

Absolutely. Yeah.

L

Lydia Mihalik 09:54

Yeah.

J

Jason Duff 09:54

You know what you're asking of them.

L

Lydia Mihalik 09:56

Yeah. That's awesome.

J

Jason Duff 09:57

Yeah. When did you get the idea that you wanted to run for mayor?

L

Lydia Mihalik 10:00

Oh, good, good question. So I went from working in community and economic development for the city. I then did grant— so I wrote a grant for benches and trash cans on Main Street in our downtown to ODOT. I think it was like Trans— I got to remember what the program was. Transportation Enhancement, or— I'll remember it here in a minute. But we won. We got it. It was the first grant. I think it was for \$250,000. We got brand new benches and trash cans. And suddenly, I was the grant expert. Because every community is looking for a grant writer.

J

Jason Duff 10:44

Well, a lot of communities, they struggle with resourcing a full-time position around that, or they then outsource it. You know, for a lot of communities, the cost to number one, hire that position is one challenge. The other one is the cost to administrate the grant. Because just because you're awarded the money, don't count that that money is in the bank and that you're not going to have some strings attached to it.

L

Lydia Mihalik 11:09

That's right. So I wrote this grant and suddenly I was an expert at grant writing. And so the Hancock Regional Planning Commission was looking for a grant administrator. Someone not only to write the grants but also administrate the money, administer the money when it came in. And so I bumped up and went to work for HRPC. Loved that job and did that for several years. Made a lot of friends, did a lot of projects together with a lot of different communities, and then, you know, eventually got to the point where I thought that I could offer something more. We were in a really tough time at the city. There were some challenging things in front of us, and there was a mayor's election that was coming up. And so in talking with a few friends and colleagues, they said, "Well, you know, Lydia, you should try this." And I was like, this is crazy. I would've never thought that I would run for a local position or any elected office. And I did. And I threw my hat in the ring in a highly, hotly contested primary, 'cause in Northwest Ohio or in Ohio in general, and it hasn't changed in the last 20 years, primaries are, are challenging, are challenging.

J

Jason Duff 12:40

And, um, especially because a lot of communities— and correct me if I'm wrong— the name recognition, the— they had their parents ran for office. I mean, it's just there's, there's some challenges, uphill battles that you face with that.

L

Lydia Mihalik 12:54

Yeah. Um, but, you know, I, I, uh, I worked, I had a lot of great community support, and, um, I was, uh, I was lucky enough and I won.

J

Jason Duff 13:07

And you served for how many years?

L

Lydia Mihalik 13:08

So I served for 7 years. So my first term, I fully served. And then my second term, I actually ran unopposed, which is the best way to run.

J

Jason Duff 13:22

Which also speaks to the way that you were running the city.

L

Lydia Mihalik 13:26

Well, I had a great team, an incredible team, best team ever.

J

Jason Duff 13:30

And you were elected the first mayor of Findlay?

L

Lydia Mihalik 13:33

First. Woman. Yeah.



Jason Duff 13:35

First woman. First mayor.



Lydia Mihalik 13:36

I was actually the 55th mayor. So.



Jason Duff 13:39

55th mayor, first woman mayor.



Lydia Mihalik 13:41

First woman. Yeah.



Jason Duff 13:43

So breaking barriers.



Lydia Mihalik 13:44

Yeah.



Jason Duff 13:45

Which we need to do more of that, right?



Lydia Mihalik 13:47

Yeah. Yeah. And then, you know, Governor DeWine and Lieutenant Governor Husted were successful in their campaign and they called and said, would you like to join the team? And I went and had a conversation with him down in Cedarville, and how could I say no?



Jason Duff 14:10

So your official position is Director of Development. Yep. For the Ohio Department of Development.



Lydia Mihalik 14:15

That's right.



Jason Duff 14:16

What does the Ohio Department of Development do?



Lydia Mihalik 14:18

Oh my goodness. So our mission at the Department of Development is empowering communities to succeed. And so we do that by investing in communities, individuals, and businesses across the state. And we have a lot of activities that we're responsible for, but I would say most importantly, we want to be a partner. And we are entrusted with a lot of resources from our friends in the General Assembly to do that, but also from our friends at the federal level, and we keep Really busy, uh, especially over the last year.

J**Jason Duff** 15:01

Well, and the thing, circling back to Findlay, is that your role as a mayor during that period, there were some pretty significant headwinds with a major flood or multiple major floods, right? And the other thing is, from an economic standpoint, um, major employers in the area, like a lot of communities, there are rumors of acquisitions and sometimes those play through, and there's rumors of massive growth and changes. But as you look back of Findlay, what were some of the things that you were most proud of? Um, and also maybe where some adversity that you faced?

L**Lydia Mihalik** 15:37

Yeah, well, what the one thing I can say, uh, is, uh, well, there's a lot of things I can say that I'm very proud of. Uh, we had our, our, you know, we had an incredible renaissance in our downtown.

J**Jason Duff** 15:49

Um, you know, and I will just put a, a bullet point on that. When going downtown Findlay and seeing the new Hancock Hotel, the renovation of the historic theater, which is, you know, they saved a historic theater but really modernized it for the performing arts. And then seeing a number of new restaurants and boutiques and shops. It is a, it is a town and community that when you think of the state shining examples of successful downtowns, Finley is one of them, and it didn't used to be like that.

L**Lydia Mihalik** 16:25

Yeah, so I think there were a couple things that happened. One, we had, you know, Marathon Petroleum Corporation recommitted to Finley after they completely separated from Marathon Oil. You know, they had to— they put in a significant investment into downtown Finley. With the hotel, with the MPLX building, the new office building downtown, that was huge. And I think there's always rumors, of course, you know, what's gonna happen, what, you know, what could be, but, you know, under Gary Heminger's leadership, there just some tremendous things were happening there. And so I think a lot of people said, well, if Marathon is going to be a big leader here, then there are some other things that can transpire. And a lot of folks put money into old buildings. We started to see new retail locate downtown. People were reinvesting in their restaurants. We had new restaurants, new offerings start to pop up. We started to see residential come downtown.

J**Jason Duff** 17:47

Which is needed everywhere, right? Housing crisis. Huge.

L**Lydia Mihalik** 17:51

It was huge. And yeah, so there was just— things were changing. And we at the city were in a position financially where we could start to help improve the built environment, which was a big deal. There were some safety things that we had to take care of. I think we had two of the worst intersections in the district, in the ODOT district, that we had to fix. And so the state was a great partner with us in that. We did lighting. And some beautification work. Um, had a lovely, uh, community, uh, conversation around parking.

J

Jason Duff 18:31

Uh, there is never any controversy about parking. What do you find yourself talking about parking a lot? Exactly.

L

Lydia Mihalik 18:41

Yeah.

J

Jason Duff 18:42

So, well, now with these, all the new technology with cars, I just, you just press a button and it, yeah, does it.

L

Lydia Mihalik 18:47

So that's so true. Um, so, you know, that there were just There were a lot of things happening and all very positive. So very proud of the way that we transitioned. And there was just this, as I said, like this renaissance that happened downtown.

J

Jason Duff 19:02

Well, I think we were talking earlier, Findlay has been rated as the, for the last 9 years as one of the top, as maybe the number one, am I saying that right?

L

Lydia Mihalik 19:12

The number one.

J

Jason Duff 19:12

Number one micropolitan. Yep. And for those people that don't know what that term is.

L

Lydia Mihalik 19:17

Yeah, so a micropolitan is defined as a community of 50,000 people or less. It's a real term. You can look it up. It's not something like we just made up. But yeah, it's a, it's, we've done that now. This is, I think, our 9th year in a row. They just were announced a week or two ago.

J

Jason Duff 19:34

That's awesome. Yeah, congratulations to Fremont.

L

Lydia Mihalik 19:37

For new and expanding business, they've been now recognized as number 1.

J

Jason Duff 19:41

And that's another shining star for Ohio is that many micropolitans are in that top 50 or 100 list. And so Uh, with that, that kind of shows that there's a lot of great suburbs, neighborhoods, communities outside of the major metropolitan areas.

L

Lydia Mihalik 19:58

Yeah.

J

Jason Duff 19:59

And, you know, for a lot of guests, um, that come on the show, you know, they, they're very proud of their small town, but sometimes they feel that their town maybe isn't put in the spotlight as much as some of the larger ones.

L

Lydia Mihalik 20:12

Yeah.

J

Jason Duff 20:12

And so I'm curious, with you as a mayor, yeah, some of the frustration points that you had with the state, or the federal government, how have your lenses changed and how are you using that background to do the work that you do today?

L

Lydia Mihalik 20:25

Well, that's so, that's a great question. And, you know, what we like to say is that, you know, organizations are reflective of the top, right? So first of all, Governor DeWine recognizes that, you know, that there is a huge role to be played at the local level here across the state.. And I think one of the things that I admire a lot about the governor is that he is constantly asking, like, what's going on out there? What are they saying? How can we be helpful? And I, you know, we've had some great governors in the past. I don't know that we've had someone who has taken the time to really care and understand and be as attentive. As Governor DeWine has been. And he will ask me what my thoughts are about how we're addressing certain issues and whether or not, you know, you're a mayor, Lydia, what, you know, you were a mayor. Although we like to say what, you know, once a mayor, always a mayor. You know, what do you think about this? Regardless of what the topic of the day is. And I think that means a lot. And I think communities appreciate that about him, whether it was going through the pandemic, and I'd like to forget about the pandemic. I think we all would. Yeah, we all would. But—

J

Jason Duff 21:52

That wasn't easy.

L

Lydia Mihalik 21:53

No. But when we were going through that, I mean, he was on the phone with them once a week. What are you hearing? What can we do? How can we be more helpful? And so when you, when I think now, as we're even, take a look at the budgets that we've put together. In development alone, just in the last biennium, we had \$350 million for brownfield remediation. When have we had a governor who's prioritized that? We had \$150 million for site revitalization and demolition to take care of some of these areas that, that needed to be revitalized. We had \$250 million for water and wastewater improvements. Nobody's ever, first of all, that's definitely not sexy and nobody wants to talk about water and wastewater.

J

Jason Duff 22:47

Yeah.

L

Lydia Mihalik 22:48

But these are all areas in which we've tried to be partners.

J

Jason Duff 22:53

With local communities.

L

Lydia Mihalik 22:54

With local communities. And quite frankly, the smaller ones, small to mid-sized communities are the ones that benefit the most. Well, these dollars—

J

Jason Duff 23:02

why I appreciate that is that there are a lot of these legacy manufacturing towns that have great utilities, great access to railroad, but they've got an environmental problem. And so I think programs like the Brownfield remediation is something that can help a lot of towns that maybe have those old legacy industrial properties. And the same thing is true, like, infrastructure. And the word gets overused, but if we don't have people reinvesting in our bridges, our roads, our utilities, you know, natural gas, then future economic development projects, housings just can't happen.

L

Lydia Mihalik 23:39

Yeah, yeah, no, I, I couldn't agree more.

J

Jason Duff 23:42

So earlier you mentioned some of the, you know, the mission behind the work that you're doing. Can you maybe just quickly at a high level, like, maybe point out for the business owner that's listening or the, you know, municipality leaders that are listening, what are some of those, you know, practical ways? I mean, I, you know, checked about your website a little bit. Obviously there's a lot of resources there, but just like, what are some of those things, like at least give somebody the right direction to go find some of those resources.

L**Lydia Mihalik** 24:08

Yeah, so if you're interested in anything that we do, first of all, we could spend 5 podcasts talking about all this stuff. Yeah, there's a lot there. Yeah. So development.ohio.gov is the place to go, but let's just talk about a handful of things. So if you are a small business, you can check out all of the different programs that we have available. Primarily, we do a lot of work for free, by the way.

J**Jason Duff** 24:37

Woo-hoo! We like that word.

L**Lydia Mihalik** 24:37

I know. Through our SOCs.

J**Jason Duff** 24:39

Every small business person said amen. Yeah, right, right.

L**Lydia Mihalik** 24:42

Hallelujah. Our Small Business Development Centers are located all over the state of Ohio, and you can walk in, you can email them, you can call them up on the phone. They're very accessible. We've had a 97% — I just did my testimony for the budget on Thursday of last week, we've had a 97% increase in the usage of our small business development centers since the start of the DeWine-Husted administration. We've helped more clients through our SBDCs last year than we've ever helped.

J**Jason Duff** 25:18

I have a quick shout out.

L**Lydia Mihalik** 25:20

Let's hear it.

J**Jason Duff** 25:21

Springfield, Ohio SBDC. They are also doing some national level work. Yeah. This week we have a new business opening up in downtown Bellefontaine. Tanisha McCreary, Candy Craze is her business. And a little over a year ago, we referred her to the Springfield SBDC with her business plan. Yeah, she's refined her business plan, got access to her financing or capital. Her store, if you think every bit of vintage, modern, uh, everything's candy for kids, they've got sodas. Yeah, but it is opening up in Rainbow Row, which is one of our newest projects in downtown Bellefontaine. And that wouldn't — she'll credit this, she'll be a great testimonial. It wouldn't have been possible without her going through the training and development of the Springfield Small Business and Development Center.

L**Lydia Mihalik** 26:09

That's great. I love it. They're great. They're award-winning, like nationally recognized. And I think SBDC of the Year, if not within the last couple of years. They're awesome.

J**Jason Duff** 26:22

That's great.

L**Lydia Mihalik** 26:23

They're a great group. And so we have all these SBDCs. We have minority business assistance centers across the state. Amazing. We have programs that you can get access to capital for. Our minority business development division is going crazy right now, and a lot of it has to do with Monica Womack, who's heading up that particular division for me. We have new loan programs that have favorable terms, cheap money like 0%, 1.5%.

J**Jason Duff** 27:06

Wow.

L**Lydia Mihalik** 27:07

Cheap money. Come see us. We've got lots of money and we still have plenty left for this biennium. And we're going to have more coming up here very soon.

J**Jason Duff** 27:16

And just explain real quick, where does that money come from?

L**Lydia Mihalik** 27:19

It's— so it's state budget dollars, right?, that come to our office. So we have a microloan program, so you can get working capital up to \$45,000. Where can you find working capital at like huge 0%, right? We're not going to pull your credit. Yeah, I mean, as a business owner, game changers. Yeah, it's huge. Yeah, um, we can refinance existing debt, uh, that you have. We have a Women's Business Enterprise Loan program that we just launched maybe a year and a half ago that's been very, very helpful to a lot of entrepreneurs across the state. So we've got a lot of business assistance programs, development.ohio.gov. We have a community services division that a lot of people probably don't realize is actually within development. But this group can help with housing. We also help people keep their homes cool in the summertime and warm in the wintertime.

J**Jason Duff** 28:22

So we do a lot of energy assistance.

L**Lydia Mihalik** 28:24

Energy assistance. Okay. Yep. We have— this group also does a lot of work through the Community Development Block Grant program. So we help local communities that are non-entitlement communities. So the Money doesn't flow directly from the federal government to big cities. It comes through development, and then we work with our local partners.

J

Jason Duff 28:47

Can you give us some examples of how those funds have been used or can be used?

L

Lydia Mihalik 28:50

Yeah. So if you have areas in your community that are more than 51% low to moderate income, so there's a threshold there that exists, you can use those dollars to assist with infrastructure upgrades, water and sewer projects. You can help with housing projects. There's a whole host of activities that you can do. But our team, we have a whole team within development that actually works specifically with communities on CDBG.

J

Jason Duff 29:27

And I'm amazed at how many communities don't know that those programs are available. Or even business owners. Yeah, well, and that's the thing, just hearing today If your hesitation has been, I'm waiting to start my business because I'm trying to get access to capital, right? You're hearing of resources that are available with the Ohio Department of Development. If you're a mayor or a city saying, listen, our town's been struggling, we need to improve some of our sidewalks, our streets, you know, enhance our lighting, there are programs with the CDBBG. Say that 5 times fast.

L

Lydia Mihalik 29:59

Grants. Yeah, yeah. So I, I would say just in general If you are a local community or you are an entrepreneur or someone who's thinking about being an entrepreneur, you gotta come see me. You gotta come see me. There, there may be existing programs that we have that can be helpful, or there may be something else. Um, I, I say this all the time when we're out and about, uh, talking to folks. Um, we are solution-focused.

J

Jason Duff 30:26

Hmm. That's huge. And when you say come see you, you've got the website.

L

Lydia Mihalik 30:30

Yep.

J

Jason Duff 30:30

Are those, those offices? And how many offices? Where do people, how do they do that?

L

Lydia Mihalik 30:35

So you can, you can, uh, what, you can pick up the phone and you can call us, uh, you can email us, uh, you're welcome to come see us, uh, at the Rife Center, uh, if you want. Um, but I guess my point is that, uh, there's a way to get a hold of us. We're on social media. Um, so the, what, what I'm saying is, um, we want to be helpful. At development, we're here to help. And there it has been actually a real, it's been a source of pride for us to hear over the last several years for people to say, you know, it's something has changed, things are different, we appreciate the work that you're doing and we appreciate the approach as of late. Our first response is not, "No, we don't do that." If we can't help you, we try and find someone who can. But more often than not, there's a solution to be had.

J

Jason Duff 31:36

Love that.

L

Lydia Mihalik 31:38

Under our little umbrella. We also do— we also are home to Broadband Ohio, which is the effort from the DeWine-Husted administration to get everybody connected. Now more than ever it's important. I think we found that out in the last couple of years. People want to be able to work from home, they want to be able to learn from home, and some people even, you know, want to be able to see a doctor from their kitchen table. And so in some parts across the state, that's not a possibility, and we want to fix that. So we think that there is about 300,000 households right now that do not have access. We did a grant program last year that when all done, we'll offer up about 100,000 of that 300,000, we'll get them connected. So we've got about 200,000 left. Wow. But it's not just having access. We have to work on the affordability issue as well. We have to make sure that people, you know, have an idea of how to utilize the internet, right? High-speed internet. So there is some education there as well. So lots of things yet to do. We've got a lot of work that's going on behind the scenes. Peter Voderberg and the team at BroadbandOhio is working very diligently on that. And then, you know, that all of that on top of what we're doing with just the stuff that gets a lot of attention.

J

Jason Duff 33:13

Intel.

L

Lydia Mihalik 33:13

The big deals.

J

Jason Duff 33:14

Yeah. I was going to ask you, I mean, we like to touch on things that are trending, obviously, in this podcast too, in the economic development world. So like, what are some of those things? We've talked about Intel with other people in the past on this podcast, but like— The EV cars. I mean, the announcement was 2 weeks ago, Honda's really making bold moves of switching their manufacturing to EV.

L

Lydia Mihalik 33:32

Yeah.

J

Jason Duff 33:33

So what's trending?

L

Lydia Mihalik 33:34

Yeah. So the announcement with Honda, You know, that is going to further the plan for them to switch over, right? So we knew that there was going to be some retooling. So that is, you know, the process they're starting to get the plant ready for the next generation. So that's some exciting news. I would say, you know, there continues to be Supplier interest for not only Intel, but also for, you know, more electric vehicles. I would also say that there seems to be a lot of interest on the solar panels, solar panel manufacturing.

J

Jason Duff 34:25

Can I ask a question around the EVs? Sure. So we, you know, being a mayor, we in Bellefontaine have 3 charging stations that were installed through a grant through a local utility about 15 years ago. Oh wow. The problem is with our charging stations is that the equipment is aged and so the speed that they charge is not as readily viable for the new vehicles today. Well, I guess as all we start producing all these EV cars, how are, how can we be helping our communities get ahead of that? Because those cars, besides homes, are going to need a place to charge up.

L

Lydia Mihalik 35:02

Yeah.

J

Jason Duff 35:03

Yeah. Are those conversations kind of happening? Okay.

L

Lydia Mihalik 35:05

So they are. And I think depending on where you live, there are— those conversations are happening at a quicker, more rapid pace than others. So, for instance, in Columbus, I think there, you know, I know conversations are happening within like the Smart Columbus board about how they can get ready for the necessary infrastructure that's needed to help support the adoption of electric vehicles and what they need for that. Other communities are having that conversation. I didn't realize that they were— there are 3 here and they were installed 15 years ago.

J

Jason Duff 35:49

Innovative. And we're thankful that the, you know, at the time Dayton Power and Light, which is AES today, funded a grant to install it in our municipal parking lot. Where I'm excited though is that if you have a great downtown that's got great restaurants and coffee shops and places to shop, if people are looking to charge, yeah, what a great economic development tool to have more charging stations or to be the place that people want to stop on their day trip to charge. And so we're, we're trying to have conversations with our local leaders, and I imagine a lot of other leaders that are listening are probably thinking about that too.

L

Lydia Mihalik 36:25

Yeah, look, I, you know, what I would be thinking about— and I'm going to see Mayor Stahler very soon, like in a few minutes. Oh, great. Um, so what I would be thinking about is, you know, how do you partner with a Honda, uh, or an LG around making sure that, you know, you are this flagship community to be the place.

J

Jason Duff 36:54

Can you plant that bug in his ear?

L

Lydia Mihalik 36:55

Yeah.

J

Jason Duff 36:56

Thank you. Well, and I think that for other people, right? Yeah. That's how we, that's how we kind of— I mean, yeah, we talk about this on the small scale here. We're talking about it right now in Bellefontaine. But like, you know, talking about Intel, I was, you know, doing a call with some of your staff before this episode and talking about like what it took to get the site ready for Intel, right? Yeah. And it doesn't just happen. Intel doesn't just come and say, hey, we'd like to, you know, come to Ohio. So like, just thinking about economic development, and I know you got some things coming up in the budget proposal about, about, you know, getting sites ready for that. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

L

Lydia Mihalik 37:33

Ohio Future Fund. Yeah, so that's a \$2.5 billion proposal.

J

Jason Duff 37:39

Wow, billion with a B.

L

Lydia Mihalik 37:41

Yeah, it's a lot of money, um, all coming to development hopefully. So yeah, so, you know, our thought process behind this and obviously working with the governor is that we want to make sure that there are places all over Ohio that get to take advantage of this incredible momentum that we're seeing. And not necessarily that we need, you know, 25 mega sites, right? But we need sites. And I think because we've had so much so much success over the last several years, we've gobbled up a lot of the sites that we have had available. And so we want to make sure that there are, there are sites that are prepped, what I would call project ready. And so that means that they have, you know, the right amount of water service to them, that they're, they've got electricity and gas and, you know, all of the things so that when the company comes looking, they could say, yep, I want to be here. And I think right now we have some sites, but they have a few things that are missing. Not to say that we can't get that done in quick order, but it would require us to go to the legislature and ask for some additional dollars because we can't put all of that on the local community. And I think we've, we've shown a willingness to wanna continue to be good partners, uh, like we're doing in Fayette County. Um, there are some other counties as well, uh, that we're in conversations with right now, and they know that. Um, so we just wanna be a little more proactive. And so that's what this fund, uh, will hopefully do. And, um, My hope too is that there will be— not only do we have existing sites that we know need some work, but there are other creative ideas out there and there are other things I think that communities, they've been looking at or contemplating for a while, but they just haven't had the capital to be able to get done.

J

Jason Duff 39:50

Yeah. It's the planning piece is really important is that, you know, I really think thinking through what is possible in your town or your community Sometimes people call that, you know, looking to do a strategic plan or, you know, working to get a master plan of your facilities and your goals. A lot of towns have just not been exposed to that planning process. Can you speak to any advice, like, to how to help people get thinking of what do we need not only today, but 5 years, 10 years, 20 years down the road?

L

Lydia Mihalik 40:20

It's, it's so incredibly important. Um, you know, we've had this conversation with a lot of the communities that, uh, in in response to the Intel announcement. And I have had this dream big conversation, but be smart about it, right? Because this is— you're going to get one shot to be prepared for the growth that's coming. And that's not to scare you, but it's just let's be mindful and intentional. Everyone loves to use that word now. But be intentional about what's coming. And, you know, if you want to make the most of the opportunity, great, but it has to be something thought out. So take the time to plan and then work the plan, as opposed to just letting it happen to you. And there's a lot of value, I think, in that process. Is long. Yeah. And it takes effort, which I think people don't understand unless they've been through it. But it's so incredibly worth it. Yeah. We have a lot of communities now. Of course, we have the \$500 million Appalachia Community Grant Program.

J

Jason Duff 41:42

Huge, by the way. Thank you.

L

Lydia Mihalik 41:44

Huge investment. But we have a planning portion that helps put together these transformational projects. And we just procured the planners and they're, you know, getting matched up and they're on their way. But this is a moment for communities that want to take the time and plan for the future. And I'm excited about what they're going to come up with. But yes, it's so valuable, so incredibly valuable.

J

Jason Duff 42:12

So part of your career you've been— you mentioned team a lot, and also you were recognized down at Rio Grande, uh, for forming an alliance of getting other mayors together, which is huge. Yeah. And how are you thinking about— so as we're looking into the future, we have some waves that are coming. So with the successes of last year, the amount of trades and construction that is needed to accomplish our goals the amount of people that we need to fund and support the existing operations that we have in the state, plus the new coming online. How are you thinking about preparing for those waves?

L

Lydia Mihalik 42:53

So I think, first of all, we're excited about what is coming. And I think also we know that success is not continually guaranteed, right? So we have to stay hungry.

J

Jason Duff 43:12

And humble, right?

L

Lydia Mihalik 43:13

And humble, right? Yeah. And so I think there are a couple things that we have been thinking about lately. A lot of it has to do with making sure that we are prepared for the need for the workforce, right? And we know that our our normal population growth is not keeping up with the demand. So, you know, our fertility rate— our mortality rate actually surpassed our fertility rates, our birth rate, the first time ever, for the first time ever, a couple of years ago, back in 2021. And so our our birth rate here in Ohio is about 1.7 children per woman in, in Ohio. The national rate is 1.6, so we're just ahead of the curve. In order for us to naturally grow our population, it has to be 2.1.

J

Jason Duff 44:20

Wow.

L

Lydia Mihalik 44:21

So we have to do this massive marketing campaign to get people from the outside come to Ohio.

J

Jason Duff 44:29

I thought you were going to say for people to have kids.

L

Lydia Mihalik 44:31

Well, yeah.

J

Jason Duff 44:32

Well, Ethan, you better get busy.

L

Lydia Mihalik 44:34

Yes, you're right. So I just want you to know I've done my part.

J

Jason Duff 44:37

I have 3 kids. I'm sorry. It's funny. I need to do better. Yeah, that's right. You and me both, man.

L

Lydia Mihalik 44:43

I've done my part. I've got 3. And, you know, Governor DeWine has several.

J

Jason Duff 44:49

Yeah, I think he's winning.

L

Lydia Mihalik 44:49

I think they're like on their 25th or 26th grandchild. So we can't just rely on them.

J

Jason Duff 44:56

Yeah.

L

Lydia Mihalik 44:57

But so we, we are in this intentional marketing campaign where we have to get people to come to Ohio. And I quite frankly, we've got a great story to tell and we're excited about it, but it will help us with this trade demand. You know, we are also working very diligently in the education system. You know, not everybody has to go to college, right?

J

Jason Duff 45:21

College is great for us. Yeah, we got that benefit. Yeah. But what's interesting today And I shared this on a previous podcast, we cannot find plumbers right now. Oh, and you know, a lot of the work that we do at Small Nation and renovating buildings, maintaining those buildings, and many of them are restaurants— if you have a plumbing issue in a restaurant, you're out of business. And so that, that's how the shift has happened. And there's great opportunities in trades today.

L

Lydia Mihalik 45:46

Yeah, look, and that having— you can make— there's great opportunities you can make one heck of a living.

J

Jason Duff 45:53

Yeah, being a plumber.

L

Lydia Mihalik 45:54

Great money. An electrician.

J

Jason Duff 45:56

Great money.

L

Lydia Mihalik 45:56

Right, right. Uh, you know, you could make the money the director of development makes.

J

Jason Duff 46:02

It's true, it's true.

L

Lydia Mihalik 46:04

Like, if I need a job, I might become a plumber, right? Um, so, uh, you know, it's, it's— there is— and, and I think the message actually is getting there because we are looking now in the budget to open up spots that aren't available in our career centers and in our, you know, in our education systems, which I think before, you know, has been a problem where we could not fill them or we're having issues filling them. We're also trying to find people to teach these classes, which I think is becoming an issue. So the mindset is changing, which is encouraging to me. So I think the future is bright, but I think we didn't get here overnight. Yeah, we're not going to fix it overnight, but I think we're starting. Yeah, we're starting to get there.

J

Jason Duff 47:02

You know, one thing that we've heard from a lot of people on the podcast is the way that they see economic development changing. It's not as many dirt-shovel-ready industrial parks. I mean, you still need them, but it really is the quality of life amenities that are available in the community. So the coffee shops and the craft beer bars and, you know, the places that have authentic culture, whatever that culture is like. And that's what's kind of neat about our state, is you travel around, there are different regions that have identities, and there's these really cool places to get the the great, you know, fried bologna sandwich or the awesome donut. And I do think tourism, you know, the state to the north, Michigan, you know, has done a really great job with their Pure Michigan campaign. So part of what I hope we can do and excited for your team to continue to lead the way is really brand Ohio. And we've heard terms, you know, with this Intel announcement, we are called the Silicon Heartland.

L

Lydia Mihalik 48:02

Heartland.

J

Jason Duff 48:03

Yeah. So, but it's figuring out from a tourism standpoint or a living standpoint, why would I want to move my family to live in Ohio?

L

Lydia Mihalik 48:11

Yeah. So do you, do you like that Silicon Heartland?

J

Jason Duff 48:14

You know, I think if you understand it, I love the word the Heartland, and, and I think that the piece of technology is, is going to be great. I get excited when I travel to other states or other communities. Like, I want to know them to be authentically something. It doesn't have to be, you know, something that I particularly want to stay there and live forever, but we, like you said, we do have so much with the affordability and the great universities and these awesome vibrant cities, and then the friendliness of Midwestern values. Like, all of that stuff, we just have to market ourselves.

L

Lydia Mihalik 48:48

Yeah, no, I'm, I'm totally with you. So the, the authenticity, um, is, is really important, uh, and I think that, you know, we When Intel grabbed onto and started using that Silicon Heartland, I think people loved it because it pulled on to an emotion that felt original and something that we could— something that felt not kind of retro in a way. And it was like, oh yeah, no, that's, that's us. That's who we are. And we weren't afraid of it. We weren't ashamed of it. It was just like, yeah, no, that's us. And so I would not be surprised if we don't go looking for the heart in the future.

J

Jason Duff 49:48

Yeah, love it.

L

Lydia Mihalik 49:50

So Stay tuned.

J

Jason Duff 49:51

Stay tuned for that.

L

Lydia Mihalik 49:53

So stay tuned for that. And I would say that, you know, we are going to be a lot more aggressive in how we market the state. And look, tourism is really big business for Ohio. It's a \$50 billion industry.

J

Jason Duff 50:08

Wow.

L

Lydia Mihalik 50:09

\$50 billion. Yeah. It's a ton of jobs for us. It's very important. You know, Mike DeWine has had that as a top priority for us because it leads into other things. We just started within the last, I would say, 18 months working on a Live in Ohio campaign, but we, I would say, look very soon for us to have a more holistic message with a little more heart.

J

Jason Duff 50:37

Yeah, I love that. And, you know, it's great to look in the future and lots to look forward to. Appreciate you taking the time to be on the show.

L

Lydia Mihalik 50:44

Yeah, you guys are awesome. Thank you.

J

Jason Duff 50:46

What were some of the professional development resources? This is just a question we ask everybody on the show, you know, that were impactful for you along your journey? It could be literally anything, a book or mentor or something.

L

Lydia Mihalik 50:56

So, uh, first of all, uh, don't discount a mentor. Uh, so, uh, you know, I— when I first started, uh, in my role as mayor, um, I, uh, looked up, uh, into an executive coach and a mentor in Paul Wurstel. Great guy, uh, still talk to him occasionally, uh, but he was, uh, he was amazing. And helped me, you know, he was in the business for 40 years, knew a lot, helped me with establishing culture in my organization. I still use some of those things with our group at the Department of Development now. He actually gave me the book *The Energy Bus* by Jon Gordon. It's about positivity, and it helps with teams. So those two things I think I would share with anybody.

J

Jason Duff 51:51

Yeah, that's great. Thanks for sharing this.

L

Lydia Mihalik 51:53

Yep.

J

Jason Duff 51:53

And then I know you dropped it before, but where can people follow some of those resources that you were talking about earlier in the show or what's happening with the Department of Development?

L

Lydia Mihalik 52:02

Yeah, so we're on Twitter and we're on Instagram, right? And you can— yeah, development.ohio.gov. And yeah, that's, that's—

J

Jason Duff 52:16

I'll put some of those in the show notes as well.

L

Lydia Mihalik 52:17

You should.

J

Jason Duff 52:19

Yeah.

L

Lydia Mihalik 52:19

And you look, Small Nation, you guys are great. You're incredible. We love you.

J

Jason Duff 52:24

Thank you.

L

Lydia Mihalik 52:24

We love it here. We talk about you all the time. We sing your praises. Like, we're huge fans.

J

Jason Duff 52:31

We're all learning together. And that's the thing about the resources that you shared today. What I walked away with— I'm pretty in tune to— I thought I was— to like all the things that are happening around the state. But you introduced me to programs that I didn't know was available. And I think that that's what's so great about the work that we're doing to impact community. It's helping bring light to cool stories and good things that are happening, but also the area where there are challenges that we can overcome. And I think as leaders, like, that's what we, we've got these waves of, of things that are not easy, but if we can find great tools and resources, we can connect local leaders with some of our state leaders globally think about how this is Ohio's year. Like, we're gonna win, and win in a way that is our authentic nature and self and something that we can all be really proud of. So let's do this, right? You are too. Thank you, Director Mauer.

L

Lydia Mihalik 53:28

Thanks, guys. Yeah.

J

Jason Duff 53:30

All right, well,

E

Ethan DeLeon 53:30

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