

# Episode 86

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Columbus Partnership, economic development, regional collaboration, Columbus Ohio, placemaking, talent attraction, Intel semiconductor, Honda manufacturing, retail headquarters, business leadership, affordability, infrastructure investment, entrepreneurship, small town pride, workforce development

## SPEAKERS

Jason Duff, Kenny McDonald, Ethan DeLeon

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K

**Kenny McDonald** 00:00

Inherently, people want to be together to enjoy music and to shop together and to be together, and money seems to flow from their pockets when that happens.

E

**Ethan DeLeon** 00:10

Welcome to the Small Nation Podcast, brought to you by CoverLink Insurance, where people are more important than policies. On this show, we unpack lessons from entrepreneurs, break down development strategies, and do deep dives on small town success. Our goal is to provide value to our listeners by hosting conversations that teach, inform, and inspire. Hey everyone, my name is Ethan DeLeon, and I'm here in the studio with the founder and CEO of Small Nation, Jason Duff. Today we are excited to be virtually hosting the president and CEO of the Columbus Partnership, Kenny McDonald. Kenny, welcome.

K

**Kenny McDonald** 00:48

Thank you guys for having me. Hey, Kenny.

J

**Jason Duff** 00:50

Yeah, it's great to have you on the show. I'm a huge fan of Kenny. I followed his career. With a number of roles he's had in Columbus, but particularly today I'm excited to hear from him. There are so many great things happening in Ohio, in the Midwest, but it is something that if you go around other places in the Midwest, other cities are all talking about Columbus. They're trying to figure out the secret sauce of some of the big deals that have been landed. Also some of the things that are happening from a sports perspective, an entertainment perspective, which has been huge, and Ohio starting to get this reputation that it's a great place because it is for tourism. And so I'm just excited to talk about that. But Kenny, I got to hear, you know, the story about how did you find Columbus or how did Columbus find you?

K

**Kenny McDonald** 01:45

Well, it's a longer story. I'll actually start since it's a Small Nation podcast. I am from a very small town in eastern Montana. Called Miles City, Montana.

**J****Jason Duff** 01:59

Miles City, okay.

**K****Kenny McDonald** 02:01

When I grew up, it was about 140 miles to a McDonald's. Wow.

**J****Jason Duff** 02:06

That is actually an economic development metric for a lot of communities.

**K****Kenny McDonald** 02:10

So, yeah. A great place, still is, and is still what I call home. And I've been here in Columbus for 14 years. In between, I went to college in western North Dakota at Dickinson State, another small town, small college. And several pounds ago, I played basketball there. Okay. Basketball took me to Georgia Southern with a, with a coach and a family that I knew well. I went to work for an NCAA rep in Georgia Southern. That was my, my first foreign assignment with South Georgia. For an Eastern Montana guy.

**J****Jason Duff** 02:52

A little bit of a transition.

**K****Kenny McDonald** 02:54

But I cut my chops there and actually had my first economic development role in Savannah, Georgia, back in the mid-'90s. And I've worked in several communities since— Greenville, South Carolina, Charlotte, North Carolina, Albuquerque, New Mexico. And, and it was a corporate site selection person for about 8 years of my life going around the world. Locating manufacturing plants in, in several countries and small towns all over the place. So 28 years later, here I am in Columbus, Ohio, and just loving it.

**J****Jason Duff** 03:33

Well, you know, your background in basketball, obviously sports are important in the state, but also particularly in Columbus. So I I have to ask, is there a connection to Ohio State with your passion in sports?

**K****Kenny McDonald** 03:49

There is now. You're not going to—

**J****Jason Duff** 03:51

Good answer.

**K****Kenny McDonald** 03:53

There is now. For the last 14 years, I've been an avid Buckeye. But before that, yeah, I'm really just a hoops fan. And as you guys know, coming from a small town, really the school, the high school, Uh, the Friday night football games and stuff are kind of the center of, uh, the world. And, uh, I kind of come from that. And Columbus, as big as it is now, uh, you know, Saturday afternoons and Saturday nights in the fall are meant to watch the Buckeyes.

**J****Jason Duff** 04:27

I love it. Well, uh, for those that may be listening that may not be quite so familiar with the Columbus Partnership, can you maybe explain what the Columbus Partnership is and the kind of work that you do?

**K****Kenny McDonald** 04:37

Columbus Partnership was, was started, really at the turn of the century, at the request of Governor Voinovich to some business leaders here in, in Columbus to, to just really come to the table and be kind of a consolidator of business leadership in the Columbus market. I think that we did some interviews earlier this year with some of the founders, which was fascinating to me. And 7 or 8 leaders of the— Les Wexner and John F. Wolfe and Jack Kessler and the leaders of Nationwide and Cardinal Health.

**J****Jason Duff** 05:17

Big names. Those are big names.

**K****Kenny McDonald** 05:18

Yeah. As much as, you know, you'd think they would be with each other all the time, they're— even 25 years ago, they're leading busy lives and Governor Vujanović asked them to just start having dinners and getting together. And here we are, you know, 23 years later, we have 82 CEOs that come around a table regularly. And on a daily basis, we're interacting with them, trying to move our region forward, really with economic development being the number one priority and the ultimate vision of making this the most prosperous place in the country where not only are we growing, but our standard of living and the ability for everybody to access that opportunity is the best in the country.

**J****Jason Duff** 06:07

And for Columbus' sake, so, you know, the, the governor, you know, George Varnovich at that time, there was some challenges in Columbus. I mean, it, it wasn't for a long time in the, the top 10 of the best Midwest cities. Can you maybe speak to why you know, at that time where, where Columbus was and some of the problems?

**K****Kenny McDonald** 06:31

Well, I, I'm, I'm, first of all, I'm a huge, um, a student of cities around the world. And, um, you know, I'm fascinated by their resiliency and their, um, uh, you know, the spurts that they have, uh, across history and stuff. And you can study all the great cities of the world. And, um, you break that down and think about a place like Columbus. Cincinnati and Cleveland were such powerhouses for much of the last 100 years and were dominant metro areas, maybe some of the most dominant metro areas in the country. Add Detroit just north of us and Pittsburgh and stuff just another 3 hours from us. And it was a, you know, it was a college town and it was a, uh, it, uh,, it was kind of, kind of like Austin sandwiched between Houston and Dallas, uh, that college town, state capital, um, and, uh, kind of developed its own culture, incubated, let's say, for, for a while. Um, and then what I, what I always say is I think the economy met us. If, uh, if you look at the, the, uh, what companies want, um, uh, in terms of the really big stuff now, they want access to talent. They want to be near university research centers. They want to be in places that have a lot of resources like Ohio and Columbus. And we were rising right when the economy was sort of changing in mass. And we became a big service economy with JPMorgan Chase and Nationwide and all these companies. And lately we've become a place that's become has a resurgence as an industrial center with Intel and Amgen and the manufacturing centers of the digital economy, which are data centers and the cloud computing centers that we have all over central Ohio.

**J****Jason Duff** 08:31

I admire that, and it's been fun to watch Columbus continue to evolve. You know, I remember 20 years ago, you know, just coming out of college, and a lot of my friends were looking for that big city experience. And that was a time when the Short North was really coming into its renaissance. And the Short North is a neighborhood kind of between Ohio State's campus, which you mentioned that Ohio State's, you know, it's a huge draw. It's one of the largest college campuses in the country and well-respected college campuses in the country. And then what is the downtown area? And it was really awesome to be a part of that resurgence of an area that the Victorian Village, which at some point in time was struggling, but artists started coming into that area, investors started improving real estate, and then you started to get restaurants and coffee shops and all this, this vibrancy. And that was a place that people wanted to be, and it was also a point of pride for Columbus. And maybe, can you speak— you mentioned a few of the large employers that are in the Columbus region, and those, you know, employ lots of people. They need big office buildings and amenities around those office buildings. But there's also some small brands that I think have, you know, gotten a big reputation that also are a big part of Columbus's DNA in the last, you know, 10, 20 years.

**K****Kenny McDonald** 09:56

So, oh my, oh my gosh. I mean, first of all, I should absolutely mention, near, near to your hometown in Bellefontaine. But Honda has been here for 40 years. And the Columbus market in central Ohio is now one of the larger car manufacturing locations in the entire world. And we produce 3 times as many cars as the rest of Ohio, just in central Ohio.

**J****Jason Duff** 10:23

I'm proud to drive one. Proud to drive one. Yeah, and some of the vehicles that are made here, for people that may not be aware of this, that Honda and Acura manufactured are the most American-made vehicles you can buy.

**K****Kenny McDonald** 10:37

Absolutely.

**J****Jason Duff** 10:38

Which is a point of pride, like, for people that want to buy and invest in, you know, our local economy and our employers and America's economy. Buy Honda, buy Acura.

**K****Kenny McDonald** 10:49

I say it all the time, and I couldn't agree with you more. And then you think about some of the other industries This was where fast fashion was created. Uh, you know, you have the, the Schottenstein family and the, and the family of brands like American Eagle and, uh, DSW and on and on, the brands of the Schottenstein family and Schottenstein stores, uh, runs. And then, uh, Mr. Wexner and the incredible, uh, run that he had, uh, for 50 years really, uh, starting with one store and then becoming, um, really the the driver of the fast fashion industry across the world. And we are still the third largest retail headquarter location in the United States behind New York and Los Angeles with Abercrombie Fitch and Express and Victoria's Secret and on and on and on. And then I got to brag a little bit about some, you know, White Castle burgers and Wendy's hamburgers here. Of course, they were founded right here with Dave Thomas and the, and the White Castle enterprise that came here so long ago. We're really blessed to be like a brand headquarters, and I could— like, Crazy Glue and all these great products are headquartered here in Central Ohio, and I could go on and on about all of it. When you really look behind the curtain and below the surface here, you just have more than you think, which I think is one of the best things about Ohio and Central Ohio.

**J****Jason Duff** 12:17

Well, it had become a big business. Many, you know, if you look at the— I love following a lot of the History Channel's documentaries that talk about, you know, how the food that built America or all the different themes, Build America shows. And there's many Columbus, Ohio mentions and connections with a lot of those origin stories. And you mentioned some of the companies, but to really become a big company, you also have to some point start out small. Is there any kind of stories that you're, you know, kind of, uh, you know, that deserve a shout out or recognition of some of those small entrepreneurs that are really doing something significant or have done something significant in Columbus that, uh, you think are good models to, to look at or follow?

**K****Kenny McDonald** 13:05

Well, we've got a lot of examples. I'll go back in history though and say, um, look at what the Schottenstein family's done. Look at what Mr. Wexner has done. Look what Nationwide did, which is now just this behemoth, but it was founded here with Farmers Co-op. And look what Cardinal Health did. The largest company in Ohio was founded in Dublin, Ohio, just minutes from you guys. And that was, that was just an entrepreneurial effort. So it's in our DNA here. This is not like a new thing for us. You know, now you have great venture capital here, Drive Capital, brag all the time about Rev1, our seed capital firm and studio set there. They're the most active VC in all of Ohio and doing all kinds of things, helping founders get things started. And then I look at guys like Matt Scantlin and the Scantlin family, Matt and Pete Scantlin. With the enterprises they've created— CoverMyMeds and Health, Orange Barrel, and on and on. And I'm just— I— Beam, I just ran into Fro the other day. Beam Dental is a great company that I brag on all the time. You can not only start a company here, but you can scale it and make it into a huge headquarters and a global brand without ever leaving Ohio.

**J****Jason Duff** 14:39

I love when I go to other parts of the country and those people that are kind of in tune to product development or, um, you know, new ideas, they often talk about Ohio and particularly Columbus being the test market for the world. Why is that, Kenny?

**K****Kenny McDonald** 14:58

Well, we, we represent America. I mean, it, first of all, um, You know, a lot of people think that we're, um, a lot farther in the west than we are. We really are a Mideast, uh, state. Ohio is a very highly populated state. It's one of the top 25 economies in the entire world. It's, you know, uh, nearly what Sweden is when you look at GDP and things like that. So it's not a small economy or small place, and you have a lot of stuff here. Um, and you have almost 12 million people as well. So, and it's kind of this mix of small towns, true agricultural pieces of the state. And then you have Toledo, Dayton, and the three C's. And it's not centered around one metropolitan area. The diversity you have here is just amazing.

**J****Jason Duff** 15:52

I love that. And in fact, being a little selfish as a consumer, I loved jumping into Big Lots' new home furnishing store. So I was over in Delaware last week and actually, have you been— you, it's your home, you're living there now.

**K****Kenny McDonald** 16:08

Yeah.

**J****Jason Duff** 16:08

Have you been to it yet?

**K****Kenny McDonald** 16:09

I have.

**J****Jason Duff** 16:09

Yeah. It's actually pretty darn impressive. Yeah. And, you know, I know, you know, kind of the headwinds of retail are certainly challenging right now, but like being able to be that test consumer in some of these really, you know, new menu items, new clothing items, new ways to shop. Um, just that, that's really one big perk of also living in Ohio. But, uh, you know, as you, uh, are, are looking at Columbus, and you mentioned that, um, convening people together that can share ideas or share best practices or also share challenges they're running into— on the podcast we've had many guests on that have talked about that concept of masterminding, and it seems like what came out of that meeting 20 years ago with the people that you mentioned is the Columbus Partnership being this great mastermind. Can you kind of get us up to speed on what are some of the things, the new things, initiatives that you guys are working on and also, you know, what you're excited about?

**K****Kenny McDonald** 17:09

Well, let me go back. You mentioned something there. I think what's really important for people to understand is it definitely wasn't one meeting. It was a group of people that decided they were going to have a dinner and then they kept having dinner. Love it. And we've done that dinners and time spent together and curiosity trips to different parts of the country every year for 23 years. We went to Boston and to Harvard Kennedy School and had some of the best leaders in the world talk to us about what makes a great city, how to address your challenges, how to get inspired about this stuff, how to learn about what's around the corner, not just for cities, but, but for business and things like that, and how we needed to adjust to, to those times. And that actually is what leads us to what we're doing today. Our curiosity right now is we're going through one of the biggest changes, I think, in 50, 60 years. You know, cities— when cities transformed from being industrial centers to being office locations, particularly in larger cities, that was an enormous change. And we sometimes think that these big buildings in the center of cities always existed. They did not. This is where the manufacturing centers were and all the people lived. They slowly went out in the suburbs and things like that. We're at an inflection point where now we have to remake a lot of those into new neighborhoods. I'm fascinated. I hope I'm, uh, I've lived well enough for 54 years to hang on a little bit longer so I can, I can see these next 25 years because how cities will be remade, whether you're a small town or a large city, um, how people work is different now. And we're just at the beginning of that. And I mean, I'm going to get excited about what we have to do to make that happen. Conversions and how we train people and how we build our transportation systems to, to account for the way that people work now. And doing what we're doing right now was, was not a possibility, you know, 10 or 12 years ago, we wouldn't have been doing this. So many ways that, that I think economic development and development and community development is going to change maybe more than it ever has. And it has greater possibilities than it ever has because we have more information and more know-how. It's just whether we're going to be willing to do the hard work and do— keep having those dinners and forcing each other to come to the table so we can make it happen.

**J****Jason Duff** 19:53

Really, uh, I love that and I agree. Um, 25 years ago, uh, I— or actually it's been longer than that, probably 30 years ago, when Easton Town Center was created. And that was a brainchild of the success of Limited and investments that, that Wexner, Les Wexner and the New Albany Company worked together to vision up and create. And I had the pleasure to interview and talk with Yomir Steiner, who was an architect and kind of visionary at that time. And I could spend days with him. He just is a really incredible thinker and You know, I, again, as an end user, watched Easton incrementally continue to build and develop and benefited from all the other malls around the Columbus and retail centers and entertainment centers, whether it was, you know, I really enjoyed living behind the Tuttle Mall for a number of years and that side of Dublin and, you know, seeing Polaris. And then of course the City Center Mall, which predates all of those things, was a huge part of the retail ecosystem in downtown Columbus. As you think about shopping, I mean, I know there's big shifts in kind of buckets. There's the retail shopping as we're getting used to the internet and our supply chain of pressing a button on our phone and it's showing up. How do you think about retail and retail in Columbus?

**K****Kenny McDonald** 21:22

Well, I'll bring it back to placemaking. I think it's so incredible. The things that are going on now and the advancements that are being made, forced by COVID and some of what we lived through and forced with, with the, the ways that e-commerce has changed shopping. I maybe just take it away from retail for a minute. Placemaking has maybe never been more important. Um, because we realized, uh, for maybe the first time in 100 years how much we needed and wanted to be together and gather. Um, once we lived through, uh, the events of 2020, but we also realized we were building places that didn't really allow that to happen very well. Um, even in small towns, um, you know, we were hollowing things out. We were compartmentalizing our communities by economic classification and all kinds of different things. And inherently, people want to be together to enjoy music and to shop together and to be together. And money seems to flow from their pockets when that happens. And so, as great community developers like you guys know, when you, when you do great placemaking, you know, there is a business model behind it. Retail's a big part of that. I'm a big believer these days, by the way, that I think retail has to lead and not follow, right? So the— what we're— if we're, if we're wanting to activate an area, how you activate an area is to cause reasons for people to be there. Shopping, retail, food, or music. Are those things that people want to consume and need to be present and proximate to it to make happen. And I think that's got to lead. We would tend to build buildings, fill them up, and then ask what retail we needed afterward. And, um, that was convenient and easier. Um, but maybe not better. I think we can be more intentional. I think the placemaking will be better as we go forward. And the next 10 years will be just innovation after innovation about how that's happening.

**J****Jason Duff** 23:39

Yeah, I love that. And I think we've talked to several, you know, even smaller retailers here in the downtown district, and the focus is certainly on curating an experience as you're shopping to the success of their retail store. And I love that you said that that's the, you know, the leader of your community development now instead of, instead of the afterthought. Appreciate that. Columbus is also known— this is the other thing, as I travel around the country, if you go to Las Vegas or even some of the fancy places in Florida, you'll see restaurant names that are the same places that we have in Columbus, Ohio. And so I got to give him a shout out because he has been an inspiration to me. But, you know, what Cameron Mitchell's and Cameron Mitchell's restaurants have done to inspire the restaurants and the restaurateurs that I work with and who, you know, what would I do? He is one of the most approachable, helpful, and successful restaurateurs in the country. But his values of how he treats people has not changed since the day he went into business. And so I know you have a chance to interact with them, but can we talk about Columbus as a dining destination and you know, why restaurants are so important to the rebuilding of economic development within the city?

**K****Kenny McDonald** 25:03

Well, um, like, food, food brings people together. Um, the— we were fortunate enough this week to host the US Travel Association here.

**J****Jason Duff** 25:11

Oh, great.

**K****Kenny McDonald** 25:12

So really big dogs in the travel industry, people from all over the country that are, you know, working, um, feverishly to attract people to their state, mostly to their cities, and, um, we talked about, look, the hotels, the, the food, uh, the hospitality, uh, industry, um, wouldn't exist. Um, uh, but for, for people trying to make it happen, right? And, um, you know, for, you know, back for thousands of years, that's the thing that's brought everybody together. And when you travel abroad, you really recognize it, right? It's the first thing you do. You, you dive into the food and you, you, you worry about what they have to eat there and stuff like that. Um, I love places like Columbus. I know the first time that I came up here and went into the Short North, um, it was nothing but local. Now it's changed a little bit. It's still actually quite a bit local, um, in authentic Columbus restaurants. Um, I love that and I love places like that. Um, and it's partially about the food. It's a lot about the hospitality. And it's also about the place surrounding you. It's what you're— it's the vibe of the place. It's the sidewalks outside. It's what's going on around the restaurant that you're eating at. Somehow makes that food taste just a little bit better. And I just have unbelievable respect for people who put it all together. Cam is a master at that. He's a lot of great partners that help make that happen. And, and there's other great people here too, but Cam is just second to none.

**J****Jason Duff** 26:47

Yeah. And those restaurants, like Jason mentioned, are definitely inspiring restaurateurs out in our neck of the woods. And I feel like working in Bellefontaine, I see more and more just how much the Columbus region or central Ohio region is impacting. Even, you know, for those who may not know, Bellefontaine is about an hour drive away from, you know, downtown Columbus. So it's like has quite, quite an impact, you know, on the state. So I guess I'm kind of curious on your thoughts on central Ohio I, you know, at one point I believe that would include, you know, coming out west on the west side of the city, you know, Marysville. But now it's like Bellefontaine is kind of even getting lumped into Central Ohio depending on the conversation you're in. Why do you think that's happening? And you think that's a good thing or bad thing? And yeah, I don't know, get your thoughts on the expansion of Central Ohio.

**K****Kenny McDonald** 27:37

Well, I think growth is— look, I'm a builder of economies. And not for, you know, bigger isn't better, better is better. And I think in Central Ohio, we're mostly doing better, meaning, you know, our growth is, it's high for a Midwest city, about 100,000 people move into our region, our 11-county region here every 5 years. Um, in, in the last 10 years, that was a lot from around Ohio because Columbus's economy was booming. What's exciting is you're bringing people now either back, um, from, you know, this is maybe where they came from, where they went to school here, and then they're coming back for mostly for, for jobs and for careers, um, but also for lifestyle. And then you're seeing people from migrating from places unknown to us before. Right? And some of the new industries we have, life sciences, the semiconductor industry with Intel, the major construction activities bringing people from all over the world. We never really had that, that kind of activity before. And the discipline it's going to take so that we do get better, not just bigger, and that we maintain the fabric and the values, um, that, uh, the places across Central Ohio, um, the quilt I call it, that we're building here. Um, and how do we retain that so the character of the places is retained even if the numbers are going up and some of the dynamics are changing? The character is what we all care about at the end of the day. I think that we all Some of us don't love change. Uh, well, as we get a little bit older, I'm one of them. Um, but you know, it's necessary and growth is, growth is a foundational thing for all good things to happen. As long as you have discipline and do it right.

**J****Jason Duff** 29:44

I agree. And we don't want to get stuck of doing and taking the same blueprint of that someone else is doing. Like you want to be the authentic version of you. And I think that a lot of cities that I talk with sometimes they're like, oh, I really wish we were like this community. And I challenge them with that. It's like, because you, you don't, you know, sometimes you don't appreciate when you live in that town what other people look from the outside and be like, you don't know how good you've got it because you have this park, or you have this theater, or you have this school, like whatever those things are. So sometimes it's really taking time to reflect on of what makes Columbus, or insert any city name, authentically that city.

**K****Kenny McDonald** 30:30

Yeah. I think the best places include, I mean, by the way, small towns are the best at this because the pride level is quite high, right? Um, good or bad, but there's lots of pride.

**J****Jason Duff** 30:42

It's true. It's true.

**K****Kenny McDonald** 30:44

Um, I think, I think that people that lean into their asset base and understand like, what are we, who are we and what do we have here? And what's our history and how do we honor it but move it forward. You just see that all the time. Look, the town that I'm from is the home of the world's largest bucking horse sale in the world. Yeah, I love it. Back in May, that's in the movie Lonesome Dove. That's the city of Montana, and they, they embrace it. And, um, uh, it makes them a lot of money, uh, for a couple of weeks every year. But, uh, it also is something that they've evolved. They do totally different than they did before. And, um, every time I go back, I am so blown away by the scrappiness and how they're rebuilding things and evolving. Um, because it's still a farm and ranch community., it still has this incredible history as a cavalry outpost. Um, but yet it's one of, I think it's one of the best small towns in America. And it, and, and, you know, just like you guys, my pride level for, for, for my hometown is, is unbelievable.

**J****Jason Duff** 32:02

All right. At this time, we're going to take a quick break to hear a word from our sponsors. Big city dining in a small town. Now that's The Syndicate. Join them for fresh steaks, pasta, or seafood for dinner, or stop in for Sunday brunch to experience one of their signature dishes such as chicken and waffles, and maybe even pair it with some Mimosa Flight, located at 213 South Main Street in downtown Bellefontaine. Tired of gyms not being open when you want to work out? Then check out the region's best 24-hour fitness center, Anytime Fitness, in downtown Bellefontaine. They have all the equipment you need and the best trainers and coaches to help you get in the best shape of your life. It's truly your one-stop shop for fitness. Anytime Fitness is open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. I, I think those that are listening with the success of the Columbus region, it is helping them find that, that their town, that authentic story. And I got to give a shout out, I believe, I believe it's Westerville that just created a new marketing campaign called Right Next Door. I think, yeah, I think it was Westerville that did that. And so, you know, part of it is like with the success of the Columbus region, that reminder, well, where is Westerville? Well, it— and I like this because it's front of mind. It's right next door. And, and I think for— if you are Kahanna or you're Hilliard or you're Grove City, or you— with all the success of the small communities in Licking County, this is a really an opportunity to really think and how do you want to brand yourself? Who do you want to become? Because it's like what you were saying, Kenny, it's like we want every part of the Columbus region to have something unique and authentic for how they contribute to the overall fabric of what makes the Columbus region special.

**K****Kenny McDonald** 33:40

Well, and, uh, you never move forward by admiring from the sidelines and wishing, um, you had something else. Um, you move forward by, um, being proud of what you have, inviting people in, not waiting for it to be perfect. It's never going to be perfect. Uh, getting people there, um, hearing them talk about it, hearing their feedback about what you have or you don't have. Um, and, and then, you know, it takes a group of men and women who are willing to do the work to continually make it better. And it doesn't come easy. And smaller you are, the harder it is, honestly. But, but you also— it's easier to find people with passion and, and put them to work. And so I, again, I'm just, I'm not, I'm not big into slogans. I'm not big into the marketing campaigns. I am for Highlighting, highlighting not just the stuff you have, but I love what you guys have done in Bellefontaine to highlight the process. You know, we recruit, I've been recruiting companies to markets for 28 years and I've never had anybody, um, think that you had to be perfect to come. They all wanted to know, hey, we know you have problems. What are you doing to solve them? We all have opportunities. What are you doing to take advantage of your opportunities? Um, and they may not phrase it exactly that way, but that's what they're asking for. And it could be a resident making a choice to live in your location, or it could be a business deciding to be there. They want to know how you're leaning into the process, and if they're the kind of people you probably want in your community, um, then they want to know how they can help.

**J****Jason Duff** 35:26

Yeah, that's right.

**K****Kenny McDonald** 35:27

You gotta have a way to— you gotta have a way to activate them.

**J****Jason Duff** 35:30

Uh, you know, entrepreneurs by nature are problem solvers. And so if you come out the gate saying, you know, we are the best and we've got everything figured out and, you know, we're, you know, we're, we're, we're, we've got it, we're done, we've solved it, um, that's not going to attract a lot of people. And, and I appreciate your thing about just saying like, let's talk about what we're good at and what we're proud of, but we're also— we've got some problems here. And that entices capital, entices entrepreneurs. Um, and, and so I think, you know, how I look to invest is I've always been drawn to the underdog and also the underrated towns in Ohio. Um, you know, we— I, I think before I jumped on the, this recording with you, I was mentioning I was just down in Piqua, Ohio, down in, uh, Miami County. Miami County, uh, kind of sandwiched right outside of the Dayton region on the, the north side. Has 3 really incredible communities. It has Troy, Ohio, which has one of the nicest historic downtowns in the state of Ohio. It has Tipp City, Ohio. If you've not been to Tipp City, it is like beautiful antique stores, picturesque community, amazing streetscape, lots of history there. And it's got Pickaway, and Pickaway's got, you know, this incredible manufacturing history and story, lots of historic building stock., but it's been the underrated town. And I've just kind of been drawn to Piqua because I'm, I, I, there's all these great people, there's all this great opportunity, but I get excited to help jump in there and solve problems. And so I think that's a reminder that even with Columbus's success, and I think you opened up and shared this, that we have to rethink downtown Columbus. And I know you and others, whether it's these placemaking activities, you're, you're asking questions, you're, you're getting the data. But you're also looking for people to jump in to help you solve some of these problems.

**K****Kenny McDonald** 37:22

No, but I have dinner tonight with a group of leaders from the Columbus Partnership, and we do these all summer long, and that's the dinner conversation. And believe me, it is not lamenting our problems. It is 100% about, you know, what do you think we can do about this? And did you see that? I was traveling there and I saw what they did. I wonder if we could do that. I wonder if we could go steal the idea and apply what we call the Columbus Way to it. How could we, how could we do that a little bit differently and, and, and meld it in our way of doing it? You, you mentioned something just a second ago. Look, entrepreneurs are critical to this. Um, you have to have risk takers in community building. Uh, and not just developers. You actually have to have risk takers at every level. You have to have risk takers at the retail level. You have to have the developer has to obviously take risk. And then you have to have people who's willing to, to take risks to, to move to an area that isn't exactly what, uh, it's going to be. You have to have businesses that are maybe willing to locate or put a small office or a footprint or something in a place that isn't quite what it's going to be. Uh, but they're betting on it a little bit and, um, they're betting on the return of it. Maybe they even embrace that, uh, the grit of it and stuff. And, um, you cannot do this with only corporate involvement and city planners. The entrepreneurs are the salt and pepper and the spice that makes the recipe taste good and make it— makes it work. I'm just a big believer that we got to have everybody at the table.

**J****Jason Duff** 39:01

Can I ask you a question about one of the things that I think Columbus has been able to hang its hat on?, and it is something that there's a lot of conversation about if and how we continue to do it, but is being a destination of something that is very affordable. I know there's a lot of headwinds right now in the economic business landscape, particularly with property casualty insurance. Those rates are going up. I know here in Ohio with the new data centers and new infrastructure that's being built, the cost of energy is also going up. And then in a high-growth market, you know, you have fewer employees. And so if you're recruiting all of these companies and we don't have enough people to pull from, that is also going to drive wages. Like, how are you and the leaders at the partnership thinking about affordability so we can keep Ohio competitive and still own that we're one of the most affordable and best places to do business?

**K****Kenny McDonald** 40:04

Well, you, you used a, a critical word. We think the, the 4 big challenges for us, uh, over at least the next 5 years, and probably it's going to take longer than that, is number 1 is affordability. I mean, inflation and the cost of things, construction and, um, housing, childcare, um, just general tax burden, stuff like that, um, is a burden for the resident, citizen, for business. And it's a bigger issue here than most parts of the country. I always say, you know, I love Ohio. Uh, you don't often come to Columbus for the beaches or the mountains, right? You come for the economy, for the placemaking that we do, for your ability to change the, the world in your industry. Um, we, we offer all that. We— and you come maybe for the lifestyle choices that you can have, uh, rural, exurban, suburban, urban., all within, you know, a 45-minute drive. Um, so affordability is a really, really big issue for us. We're going to have to work, uh, really, really hard to be innovative on the housing side and then maybe take some pressure off on childcare. And on the tax side, we're constantly working on that. The other 3 areas are infrastructure, and we are all about infrastructure. Uh, obviously that's energy infrastructure, it's the basics, water and wastewater. Which are the lifeblood of building housing. And we got such an abundance of water and clean water in Ohio that we don't take enough advantage of it. And then we're going to have to, you know, we're going to have to lean into sitting on top of the world's second largest gas reserve at some point. I'm a big fan of, of, of us using the resources we have in our part of the world and embracing the energy industry that we should be taking advantage of. And then the final two are just people want a safe place and a healthy place to live. Um, and, uh, we gotta work, we gotta work at that constantly, not just the safety side, but the health side. Um, making it a good place. That could be as, by the way, as a developer, it's as easy as sidewalks, you know, giving people the ability to walk, not just drive and stop.

**J****Jason Duff** 42:11

Sometimes it's just paint. We, we have had many guests on where we just say, you know, if you can just put a coat of paint on something, it changes the whole thought about whatever that blight or that problem is.

**K****Kenny McDonald** 42:22

So, um, and the final thing, this is an evergreen problem that will never be perfect, is just the ongoing battle on workforce and education. Um, and again, as somebody who came from a small town where the, where the schools are really the center of the universe and the focal point of the community, um, whether you're retired or starting a new family and don't even have kids in school yet. That is the scenario community, and it still is in most communities. Um, we got a lot to fix, uh, in education. Uh, we got a lot of, uh, we got to transform a lot of transformation that we have to undertake. Um, and we have some unbelievable opportunities and industries that we never had in Ohio before, and we're gonna have to do workforce delivery a whole lot different too. And it is going to be less people, but we're going to have a, we're going to have the best shot at it as anybody in the country of finding this balance, which is really hard to do. And I think we're, I think we're on our way.

**J****Jason Duff** 43:24

I'm excited. Uh, and for all the reasons that you mentioned, but also just getting to interact with you and other leaders in the Columbus Partnership. I love when Governor, or Lieutenant Governor Husted and Governor DeWine really talk about, you know, this is Ohio's time. It is just an exciting time to be an entrepreneur now living in this part of the country. So I, you know, thank you and thank you for the work that the partnership is doing. Got a question for you, and I think this is for any community leader that may be listening. This is something that they've probably all dealt with a little bit, but you mentioned that you have 82 CEOs around the table for some of these issues. And that would be, how do you get everyone's minds kind of in the right place to, you know, come together and get behind a single vision, put aside, you know, what their own interests are and things like that to unite these people?

**K****Kenny McDonald** 44:23

Well, we say it all the time, bring your experience to the table, but your interests, leave those at the door. Um, and, um, when you enter the room and you're— we're talking about these things, it's all about making, um, life a little bit easier for the people who live here and advancing the, the communities of Central Ohio. And, um, my experience is, um, that's not a hard task, um, because it is almost a relief to put those interests down for a minute of running a major public company or a global company, and everybody came from a town. Uh, I don't know, people love where they, they live. They're, they're, they're usually trying to make things better. Um, and they may be trying to solve things at their companies or their enterprises or their institutions that that collective actually, uh, opens the door or perhaps maybe comes at an issue a little bit differently than they would, that, that maybe sparks an innovative idea for them to solve a business problem when they go back out that door. And, um, the final thing I say is we have been truly blessed to have leaders like Mr. Wexner, uh, Jack Kessler, John F. Wolfe, uh, so many others that, that continue to stay at the table that are to this day unbelievably curious and trying to move forward. And the last thing is they're thinking a generation ahead. They're not trying to serve their interest over the next quarter or next year like they may have to when they meet with shareholders. They are thinking about the next generation and leaving a legacy in the communities. And it's our job to take advantage of that goodwill and to put it to good work.

**J****Jason Duff** 46:18

Yeah, I love that. Thank you for sharing that. And that's really good insight. Before we kind of transition here, looking forward, what do you think the Columbus region will look like in the next 5, 10 years?

**K****Kenny McDonald** 46:32

Well, my focus is a lot about 2029, and we're, we're doing some things that we perhaps should have done a while ago, but here we are. Uh, we're on the precipice of building the first— the largest city in the country without rapid mass transit. And that's on the ballot. And I believe that that will, um, will pass this year and you'll have rapid bus mass transit and a bunch of corridors that get activated, uh, over the next 6 or 7 years should that pass. Um, we haven't built a new, uh, airport terminal since 1958.. And we're building, we're, we're launching a, a \$2 billion terminal at, uh, Zhonglin International Airport that will serve this community for the next, uh, 50 years or more. Um, and, um, and by, you know, in the next couple years, we're gonna look, look, we're gonna open one of the largest manufacturing plants in the world. We are gonna, uh, have the first, uh, fabrication facilities in semiconductor industry built in the Midwest ever. And launching us into a whole new industry with Intel and the plant that they're building. And, and, and I'm convinced the Buckeyes will win a couple of national championships.

**J****Jason Duff** 47:51

Well, we're, we're particularly hoping to contribute to that in Bellefontaine. We've got a senior, Tavian St. Clair, that is looking pretty good for the Buckeyes. So pretty proud of him.

**K****Kenny McDonald** 48:02

You have to throw that in there. It doesn't matter. Uh, that's true, by the way. But, um, all those things are going to happen in the next few years, and I hope that the leaders that are sitting here, whether it's me or somebody else, or you guys and somebody else, is having— I hope their ambitions even more and blows ours away. And they're thinking about the 2030 to 2040, and they're setting goals for 2040. And they, uh, their goals that we can't even maybe even imagine even, you know, 5 short years away.

**J****Jason Duff** 48:34

Love it. Yeah, well, thanks for sharing your, your vision and, and just some of the things that are coming, uh, with our listeners here. And I think there's a lot to be excited for, for sure. 100%. Um, going to kind of move us along into just a more fun, uh, show segment here. I call it just a rapid-fire Q&A, just some personal questions to get to know you a little bit. Uh, the first one is, are you right or left Right-handed. Right-handed. All right. This one's a tough one, but what is your favorite restaurant in central Ohio? Do you have a favorite menu item maybe at that place that you like to get?

**K****Kenny McDonald** 49:11

All right. I'm going to just go very local. I live in New Albany. Yeah. We love to go to Blue Agave. It's just a little Mexican restaurant in New Albany. It's where we can look. I, I eat out a lot in my job and I'm eating unbelievable places like with Kim Mitchell and we're going to Hank's tonight and everything. But I'm with Jennifer and my daughters and I would like to just be at Blue Agave chilling out, maybe having a margarita and some chips and hanging out. It's about the place, not necessarily the ambiance, food or anything.

**J****Jason Duff** 49:48

So love that. Yeah, great. I love it. Good answer. And the last one is, how do you rest and recharge as a leader?

**K****Kenny McDonald** 49:56

I love to read. Look, this isn't work for me. The thinking about communities, how to build them, how to move people forward is like a lifestyle choice. And I have 3 great kids. I'll do anything to spend time with them. 2 of them are out of the house already. I got one that's a senior in high school here, starts next week, and I'm going to do my best to spend every minute with her the next year before we launch her out into college or whatever she's going to do. And, uh, I just, I take every moment to spend with them and, and then travel. I love to go out and see cities. Uh, this summer we went to Toronto, Montreal, Quebec City, and, um, drive my wife crazy thinking about all the stuff that they're doing in those cities and trying to bring it back.

**J****Jason Duff** 50:42

Yeah, sure. Awesome. Well, thanks for sharing that. That's helpful. What is one professional development resource that was impactful for you along your professional journey?

**K****Kenny McDonald** 50:54

Look, I'm a big— I got involved with the International Economic Development Council really early in my career. Just some folks that I worked for sent me. I ended up in the year 2020, I got to be chairman. It was a— I got to be virtual chairman, let's say, in 2020.

**J****Jason Duff** 51:10

Yeah. Wild times.

**K****Kenny McDonald** 51:11

They didn't go to any conferences. Um, but the IDC family of leaders that I've met and hung out with, they're leaders that do what I do and you do all over the country, um, from rural locations to big cities have become kind of like a second professional family beyond our team here. And I call them all the time and, uh, and we're knocking around. We have empathy for each other when we're having a hard day., and we, and we are competitive with each other to push each other forward. I'm a huge believer in ULI, NAOP, IEDC, things like that. Um, none of us have all the answers or near all the answers. Um, go lean in, um, take the time to do it. The relationships are more important than the content of the meetings, by the way.

**J****Jason Duff** 52:00

Uh, excited to get— just got an email today. Um, I, uh, submitted a speaker presentation to IEDC. For the event in Denver and got approved. So I'm excited to attend my first IEDC conference as a speaker.

**K****Kenny McDonald** 52:16

So yeah, great. Denver, man.

**J****Jason Duff** 52:18

Okay, awesome. And then the last one is where can people learn more about you and the work that Columbus Partnership is doing?

**K****Kenny McDonald** 52:26

Go to [columbusregion.com](http://columbusregion.com). That's where both the partnership and the work of One Columbus, our regional economic development group, and all the work of Smart Columbus and others is highlighted. And most importantly, we highlight the 11 counties and the cities from across our region and all the great things that are going on across Central Ohio. Great.

**J****Jason Duff** 52:48

Thanks for sharing that. Kenny, thank you for just sharing your secret sauce and what you've learned from Columbus, but also what you're doing to innovate and keep Columbus strong. I think the thing that I'm taking away, and I love, and I think it's an important reminder, is how are we thinking about our towns and communities for the next generation? You know, 100 years from now, what, what do we dream about and want that community to look like and to be, and the kind of legacy that we want, we want to leave? Because there were leaders before us that had that same level of thought, um, and, and it's, it, it's a, it's a great way to frame This is not just about our interest. I like, I like that too. It's not about our interest. It's about what we're doing for, for the good of the order. Someone said that state to me the other day, the statement to me the other day, and I've been using it more often in my messaging to others. It's not just about you or your interest. It's the good of the order. And I think that's a great message for this segment and obviously a reason why Columbus is, is set on a good path.

K**Kenny McDonald** 53:54

Well, thank you guys for the work you do. You know, I'm a huge fan.

J**Jason Duff** 53:57

Great. Appreciate it, Kenny.

E**Ethan DeLeon** 53:58

Thanks for tuning in on this episode of the Small Nation Podcast. We hope that conversation proved valuable to you, and if you enjoyed it, be sure to share the episode and follow the show on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, or your favorite podcasting platform. You can also subscribe to the Small Nation YouTube channel if you prefer to watch your episodes. Follow Small Nation on social media, and we'll see you in the next episode.