

# Episode 87

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

downtown revitalization, Tiffin Ohio, Seneca County, Main Street program, economic development, historic preservation, facade enhancement program, regional collaboration, small business support, Tiffin-Seneca Economic Partnership, Heidelberg University, project management, business recruitment, volunteer leadership, community branding

## SPEAKERS

Jason Duff, Aaron Montz, Donna Gross, Ethan DeLeon

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A

**Aaron Montz** 00:00

they never had been to Tiffin until they purchased their home, and they bought it because of everything they read online and saw about the downtown and how cool and welcoming of a place it was. And we've heard this story time and time again— people that work at Google remotely that are trying to get out of states like California where taxes are just so high, and they're coming to places like Tiffin. And that's why we have a housing crisis now. There are literally no houses on the market. One of them goes up, you have a bidding war like crazy, people paying way over what they're valued at, and Yeah, we've created our own monster locally and in a good way. I'd rather be on this side of the equation than the other side.

E

**Ethan DeLeon** 00:43

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're excited to have the president and CEO of Tiffin-Seneca Economic Partnership, Aaron Montz, and entrepreneur and downtown Tiffin Main Street manager Donna Gross on the show. Aaron, Donna, welcome.

D

**Donna Gross** 01:18

Thank you.

**J****Jason Duff** 01:19

Thanks. I am fanboying and fangirling over having these two today. So from afar, you know, when you're in like neighboring communities doing like similar things, it's always good to have like mentors and people that you look up to that are just rocking it out. Absolutely. And so we were chatting kind of before the segment started and I was asking them like what kind of TV and things they watch. And Ethan, you've watched The Office. Yeah, they've never seen The Office. They have never seen The Office. Now they had a really good— they had a really good excuse. They're like, we've been so busy in the last 15 years planning events, recruiting new businesses, starting new businesses. That we just haven't had a chance to watch. Jason, we've just been lazy. Okay, we, we can do better. That's what I can say, we can do better. But no, it's, uh, it's a great, uh, pleasure to have you guys in the studio today. Um, if you guys have not been to Seneca County, uh, it is a, uh, courthouse-style downtown community. Um, really great small-town values, and it happens to have two universities, really well-respected universities. So Heidelberg, and then also Tiffin University. And it's in Northwest Ohio. So if you're thinking about— I know we had Brandy Gleason from Ohio Road Trips on the podcast, and she was mentioning like all these great towns to take day trip experiences to. Tiffin is right up there in that top 5 best downtowns in the state of Ohio, in my opinion, to visit and experience. So I'm excited to hear from you guys because this has been a journey and an evolution. And, um, you also have had some different roles throughout the process, and you also— I think some of you grew up right in the community, in the community. Yeah, so like hometown to staying in hometown to, uh, hearing that. But I'm excited to hear that. But welcome to the show today.

**D****Donna Gross** 03:11

Thank you.

**A****Aaron Montz** 03:11

Yeah, thanks. Great to be here.

**J****Jason Duff** 03:12

So what is, uh, hometown for, for each of you? I want to hear from both of you and kind of your journey, because I know you both kind of I've done some stuff to, to where you are today.

**A****Aaron Montz** 03:22

Yeah. Ladies first, Donna.

**D****Donna Gross** 03:24

Thank you. So hometown to me is Chagrin Falls, Ohio. Grew up on the east side of Cleveland. Late '80s, early '90s, I went to Heidelberg University, studied business and public relations, and then moved away from Ohio. Do not judge me. I lived in Michigan for about 22 years.

**J****Jason Duff** 03:40

You know, we had Rick Keys on. Rick is the CEO of Meijer, and he is now in Michigan. And of course, Meyer is a big family name there. But he did talk about when he spent time here in Ohio and particularly Columbus, the love for Ohio and Ohio State kind of warped into his— a little similar.

**D****Donna Gross** 04:00

Oh yeah. Yeah, you can say it. I lived in a beautiful town called Birmingham, Michigan, just outside of Detroit. Lovely, lovely small town. Had that great small town feeling. In 2012, I opened up my first business. It's called Relevé Bar Studio. I became a single mom, wanted to always try my own business, and I studied ballet and theater my whole life and fitness and decided to mesh the two together and open up a barre studio.

**J****Jason Duff** 04:25

And for people that might be new to what a barre studio is, can you tell us more?

**D****Donna Gross** 04:30

You drink all day long.

**J****Jason Duff** 04:32

I'm coming. I'm signing up. I love this.

**A****Aaron Montz** 04:35

Jason, that's what I expected when I first heard that we were getting a barre studio in Tiffin. I was thrilled.

**J****Jason Duff** 04:41

That's amazing. Dora has just gotten cooler.

**A****Aaron Montz** 04:45

You show up and she says, okay, take your shoes off and wear your workout Wait, wait, wait, this is not what I signed up.

**D****Donna Gross** 04:52

So barre, uh, barre studio is B-A-R-R-E. It's the French term for ballet barre, and you use the barre to hold on to for balance as you do a whole bunch of calisthenics and stretches.

**J****Jason Duff** 05:03

I love that. That's awesome. Super cool.

**D****Donna Gross** 05:05

It's one of those workouts where it looks easy, and then once you start, you're like, this is a lot harder than I thought it would be. Um, so I did that, and then in 2019, I decided to move back to Ohio. My parents are still here. Both my boys were attending a Heidelberg University. I did not follow them to Tiffin. Yeah, I swear.

**J****Jason Duff** 05:24

Yeah, Scout's honor. Um, sure, I believe you.

**D****Donna Gross** 05:28

Uh, thanks. Relocated my business, uh, inside a beautiful building called the Laird Building right downtown. And then COVID hit. Um, I had to shut down for just a couple months, so it wasn't anything too crazy. And then Heidelberg University hired me to be a professor of dance and movement.

**A****Aaron Montz** 05:46

Wow.

**D****Donna Gross** 05:46

So I was teaching the theater students ballet, jazz, Modern Tap, all this fun stuff, doing some choreography for them. And then I went on the Downtown Tiffin Marketing Committee and helped plan a few events. So I really got involved with the downtown. Amy Reinhardt was our Main Street Manager at the time and just fell in love with the whole program of the Main Street and how that has just grown downtown Tiffin and changed it tremendously. So about a year and a half ago, I stepped into that role as Main Street Manager.

**A****Aaron Montz** 06:19

Wow.

**D****Donna Gross** 06:19

And here I am.

**J****Jason Duff** 06:20

Well, pretty, pretty awesome. So from volunteer, um, you had a business, so you got to interact, but actually to corral and lead, um, the, the messaging, the branding, the, the rebuilding and growth of Tiffin, that's, that's a jump.

**D****Donna Gross** 06:36

And it's so different than when I was attending Heidelberg in the late '90s or late '80s, early '90s. You didn't go downtown for many things. I mean, there were some bars that we would go to as students, but there really wasn't a whole lot to do downtown. So what a difference.

**J****Jason Duff** 06:52

Yes. Yeah, that's really cool.

**A****Aaron Montz** 06:53

Aaron? Yeah, so born and raised in Tiffin, Ohio. I went to college at Heidelberg University as well, where I graduated from. So I got to see the perspective of where we have come over the past, you know, 30-plus years that I've lived in Tiffin. And I remember most as a kid, my father and I would take walks. We'd walk downtown frequently because one of my favorite things to do was to peer in all the buildings, soaped-up windows. You remember the soaped-up windows that we know hardly ever see anymore, right? Uh, you would see that in all the buildings, and I'd like to peer in there. And then my father would tell me stories of what used to be in there. You know, this used to be a candy shop, this used to be a soda shop, this just story after story. And I couldn't understand, well, why is it not like that anymore? And, you know, at that time we had, you know, the Tiffin Mall and other areas. And I've always had a passion for history. It's what I graduated my degrees in, history and poli sci, from Heidelberg University. And, you know, being able to translate that into what my next role was, was, you know, mayor in Tiffin. I really had a special soft spot for downtown Tiffin and making it a better place than what we found it. And I think we certainly accomplished that from becoming a Main Street community to having some years at the state where we were almost embarrassed with the riches and how many awards that we've taken home. Downtown Tiffin is really an extra special place. And the transformation that we've seen has been nothing short of incredible. And that's because we We have so many investors, so many volunteers, and just really great people who are, are helping us with it. You know, as mayor, you get credit and you get blamed for everything. Um, so you really— what I always said is you never have to take credit for anything because you get credit whether you had anything to do with it or not. You also get the blame whether you have to. So you basically just roll with everything that goes on.

**J****Jason Duff** 08:40

It's good advice.

**A****Aaron Montz** 08:40

And it's— but it is incredible, um, the amount of people that will come up to me now, especially folks who who maybe were like Donna, but then haven't really come back like Donna did, but they're coming back to visit for their first time. And they're just floored at how much Tiffin especially, but the downtown has changed. So it's been a special story for us.

**J****Jason Duff** 09:00

You made that sound like it was pretty easy, like this just all happened overnight.

**A****Aaron Montz** 09:05

Absolutely not.

**J****Jason Duff** 09:06

Well, you know, from you starting a business and then you know, had that passion. I imagine you learned growing up and falling in love with dance and pursuing that. And then, Erin, for you, like, history and the story that you shared about your father and those walks, but then actually becoming mayor, those are both bold moves. And sometimes I think that when you're growing up in a small town, there's sometimes limiting beliefs about what you're capable of. But I'd like to hear maybe from one or both of you, like, you know, did you ever imagine that what you were doing today was your path? And if so, or if not, like, what steps did it take to get you there?

**D****Donna Gross** 09:52

So growing up, when I graduated from high school, I always knew I wanted to own my own business. I just didn't know how that was going to happen. And then you kind of, you know, you shove those thoughts aside thinking, well, I don't, I don't know how to do that. I'm I don't know if I could ever do that. And then there's just that spark in you, whether it's a person that you talk to or another business that just gives you those inspiring words, "You can do this." And then I had that thought, "Okay, if I didn't try this, would I regret it? Would someday I be on my deathbed saying, 'You know, I really should have tried that. I wish I would have.'" And I didn't want to have that. Thought later in life. So I thought if I, if I tried to run my own business and if it failed, it failed, but it might not. And that was in 2012. And the number of people that then I can inspire being a Main Street manager, talking to these new business owners, it's just —

**J****Jason Duff** 10:52

Well, I love the idea that you have to have some kind of inspiration. And then the other piece of that is you mentioned finding your supports. And a lot of the episodes, as we interview entrepreneurs, they talk about the spark. And I think that we all have that feeling of something that doesn't feel like work, that we're excited to, um, research more or try out, or we just love to do. And it sounds like with dance and fitness, that became a focus. But on the flip side, like, the support piece, uh, a lot of towns lack the Chamber of Commerce. They lack, you know, the traditional structures of a Main Street community or a tourism office. How do you find your tribe that is going to support you on those steps when it feels very lonely?

**D****Donna Gross** 11:48

I think reaching out to someone like our organization, our economic development, and then if it's a downtown project, They get sent to me. If it's out in the city or the county, you and Adam take care of that. And immediately it's that connection, whether it's in person or on the phone. Sometimes people just walk into our office and say, hey, I don't have an appointment, but I want to open my own business. What, what can you help me with? And making those connections and those relationships. And then on the flip side, having those relationships with the building owners, with our SBDC, Just giving people those resources that they need is so important.

J

**Jason Duff** 12:27

I love that. And, you know, Aaron, kind of when you think, you know, becoming mayor, like, can you tell us a little bit about that journey? I imagine, I mean, you don't look that old. So I imagine as a young person stepping into the role of mayor, what was that like for you?

A

**Aaron Montz** 12:44

It was interesting. Let me tell you. Yeah. So I spent my, I spent 4 years on city council. I was actually elected when I was a senior at Heidelberg University. Wow. Uh, in Tiffin. So you, instead of like student senate, you said, I'm going for the big one.

J

**Jason Duff** 12:58

Yeah.

A**Aaron Montz** 12:58

Well, you know, I, I go back for real. Yeah. A lot of this was when, when I was in high school. Um, I actually ran for mayor in high school. My senior year of high school, I ran for mayor. I got 40% of the vote, knocked on copious amounts of doors. I never thought I would win. Uh, I kept saying, you know, internally, I hope I— if I can get just 25 or 30%, I feel like it's success. And here I got 40% of the vote as an 18-year-old running in a city of, you know, just under 20,000 people at the time. Um, so, but I was sick and tired of hearing all of my classmates in high school saying, I'm going to college here and I'm never coming back. I'm going to college this place, I'm never coming back. And that is literally what they were all doing. I'm like, well, I actually kind of like it in Tiffin. We've got good bones, we've got all these cool historic buildings downtown. Why don't I at least try to fix it? So I got on city council, spent 4 years there, didn't feel like things were moving quick enough. So I made a very tough decision. I was also working in the private sector full-time running retail stores, and I made the tough decision at that time to actually take a pay cut from that to run for the office of mayor. And in doing that, I said, I'm either going to run for office, I'm going to become the mayor, and I'm going to fix this community and get things turned around. Or at least I'm going to try to make the valiant effort to run, win, and if I don't win, then I'll probably join the rest of them and leave because I felt like the city was not on the right path. So, won that election, very close, very close election, just outside of a recount total, and went on to win my second term with 85% of the vote. And the final time I ran, no one ran against me. But it was a great 10-and-a-half-year run as mayor. We were able to accomplish so much throughout the community. Then I was actually approached by one of our county commissioners when the position at my organization came up now, and he said, "You know, why don't you— you know, you're doing great things for Tiffin, why don't you do great things for the whole county?" At first, I kind of brushed it off as like, "Yeah, you know, cool, but no, I'm in this role, and who knows, maybe one day I want to run for state rep or something. It's perfect for me." But the more I got to thinking about it, I'm like, he's right, and I could tell even myself, I love the role. I love Tiffin. Like, it is my home. It's where I always want to be. Uh, Tiffin and Seneca County is number one in my heart and always will be. But regardless of how good of a job you do, how much support you have, the stress eventually gets to you. And there were, there were just so many sleepless nights, so many, so many times, even still this day, you almost have PTSD when your phone goes off because, you know, what happened? Who's mad? Who's suing the city? Who— you don't understand until you're in the role how that happens. So now I'm able to do the best of both worlds. I get to do economic development across the whole county while at the same time having a lead role in making the community better, whether it's Tiffin, whether it's Attica, whether it's Republic, throughout Seneca County. And it's an exciting journey. And now we get to collaborate and work with all of our other elected officials.

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

So love it. It really is a regional thing. So a lot of people, I think, get in smaller towns or markets, you get tribes and things get very territorial. You know, it's like I kind of had the analogy of sports teams, like I just really love this team. But when you look at the whole league or you look at the, the whole community, if Tiffin wins, the region wins. And, you know, do you have any examples where there's been those partnerships with, you know, your county? Because even the county-city relationships in a lot of communities is not the best. But how you kind of piloted something for Tiffin, but it really was a big win for the region.

**A****Aaron Montz** 16:35

Yeah, and I guess I'll jump in real quick. And, you know, I remember my time as mayor, so I was head of the Northwest Ohio Mayors and Managers Group, and I would constantly have people come up to me, well, you guys are doing— you're always in the news in Tiffin for good things, you know, it's not the negative news, you're always in the news for good things. How are things going so well? What's the secret to your success? And I would always start off, I'd say, well, the first thing I point to is our collaborative spirit. Like, if I need the county commissioners, a township trustee, the sheriff, I pick up the phone and I call them. And usually, I'm not kidding you, they'd stop and say, wait, wait, wait, if that's the number one key to success, that's a non-starter because we don't even talk to our commissioners, or we don't even talk to her. And to me it was just like, why not? Like, the easiest thing to do is to get along. It takes a lot more time, effort, and energy not to get along, to fight and argue, than it does to get along and work together. So I just, I couldn't— to me, I could hardly comprehend why does that not happen. And we just, time and time again in, in Seneca County, whether it's the villages, the townships, the commissioners, we work together for the common good. I can probably count on one hand how many times we had real serious fights. And every time though, we came out of that on the same page getting along. The courthouse was one of those. I was on one side, the county was on a different side. We vehemently disagreed, but most of it was behind closed doors. We came out with a unified approach at the end that was going to be best for Seneca County for the long term. And we all said, you know what, maybe not a single person on this disagreement has totally won. No one's totally lost. We're going to work together and do what's best for the county. No one's going to pick fights. No one's going to have a long-term grudge. And we don't just say that. We actually do that. And my fear, you know, the moment— so it's such a perfect circle, almost in a way like a tire. The moment you have a small chip in that, you're going to feel it and it's going to reverberate throughout the entire car and it's going to make that car begin to fall apart. Really quickly with the constant pounding and vibrations. And that's really what it is in, in Seneca County. It's a perfect ecosystem who works together, but the moment you stray, it's easy to start picking fights, not getting along. So collaboration is absolutely key. You can't say you stand for it, you actually have to stand for it.

**J****Jason Duff** 18:44

Yeah, when, um, this has been probably about 2 years ago, but Aaron hosted a team member and I to visit Tiffin, and we did a walk-around tour and, and got to meet several really great people doing things, great things in the community. And I left that day saying, there's the same kind of personalities, they just have different names. And I think it's kind of a small town thing. But one of our guests we had, which was Benji Rayhan, and he and his company does these personality assessments. And one of the things that I learned by listening to his episode was that some people have what's called a same brain, and other people have a difference brain. And I happen to be high on the difference category. So when I walk into a restaurant or a situation, I only see the things that are wrong in my mind. Like, but really the better word is I see things that are different. But in the way I communicate that to someone, because that's my unique ability and gift, it can come across as criticizing or can come across— and I think that part of where we have a lot of breakdowns in communities is we don't listen to each other and we don't understand the brain type of where that passion is coming from or that focus or that gift. And I appreciate the way that you're approaching it in Seneca County of trying to work with other public officials, which are pretty big personalities, right? And I imagine on your Main Street board, when you bring entrepreneurs and you set 12 of them around the table, by definition, these people are constitutionally unemployable. Like, they're not working for someone else. So they, you put them on a board and give them governance control. That sounds, it's pretty easy for you to manage.

**D****Donna Gross** 20:31

Yeah, it's piece of cake.

**J****Jason Duff** 20:33

Which I guess just how do you, how do you manage that or how do you harness the gifts as you're working with your volunteers or your board members to really channel them to advance downtown Tiffin?

**D****Donna Gross** 20:46

I think one of the things that I love to do is give people an opportunity to shine. I love delegating and giving those responsibilities because then they take ownership and they feel amazing that they've created something or done something, had a great event that was very successful. And I think if I were a micromanager and just taking all those things, my volunteers would feel like they weren't really doing anything. So giving everyone that opportunity and just praising them for them and giving them that opportunity to shine, it makes a huge difference. People then feel invested, and then they want to do more. And then they feel like this is our town too. I'm not just sitting on a board listening and filling a seat and checking off, you know, an agenda. They're doing things and feeling really good about it.

**J****Jason Duff** 21:39

Well, obviously something's working because Aaron alluded to it before, but when you go and participate in a number of these state organizations, their trophy case back in Seneca County and downtown Tiffin has a lot of bling. And part of that goes back to what you're saying is being able to recognize people for, for good things or positive things that awards— it creates an emotional connection and a response. And I think we— one person recently brought a problem posted on my Facebook page. It said, like, what do we do with the building hoarders that keep all of these properties vacant and they're not actively renovating them, they're not actively improving them or marketing them that they're available? What do you do to solve that? And a lot of people jumped in and were like, well, you know, enforce a vacant property code and penalize them and send the fire department in to inspect them. And I just replied back and I said, have you ever considered recognizing them and giving them an award. And it generated a lot of like angry faces, you know, like all the little emojis. Yeah, I got a lot of angries and laughs. And I actually was serious about this, but in a Facebook post you can't unpack that. So I said, what I see a lot of times with vacant buildings in town is that there was a family connection. It might have been a grandparent or a family member that owned the hardware store or owned the Hallmark shop or whatever that business was, and they can't quite let it go. They use it for storage. They can't quite let it go. And we had success recently pulling someone that was not returning phone calls, was not— you know, the mayor was trying everything, or the economic development professionals were doing everything they could to reach out to that building owner. But they added— I went down to their trophy shop and they did a plaque and spent \$20. And they said, we'd like to sit down and give your family an award for the years of service that that business provided our town. And that was the door in to starting to see a positive change, which what was a big negative in their town. Yeah, I love that. Thanks for sharing that story. Aaron, in the role of an economic development, of an economic development professional, it can be confusing to some people. And I know it looks different from community to community, but can you maybe unpack what your day-to-day looks like for us?

**A****Aaron Montz** 24:07

Oh, never the same. That's the problem.

**D****Donna Gross** 24:10

Yeah.

A**Aaron Montz** 24:10

So our organization, we're very project-oriented. So we're kind of the, the boots on the ground that you, you either get a lead from the state of Ohio. That's where a lot of our leads come from, you know, Manufacturer A, Data Center B, this and that looking for locations. We do all the research, the homework. We find out the sewer capacity, the water capacity, the zoning codes, everything that they may need for that, that business of sorts. Those are just some examples. You know, we work with restaurants, we work with all sorts of retailers. Recently we, we got a the Hobby Lobby that's in Tiffin now that's about to open, things like that. So we're very project focused. So everybody will come to us saying, hey, we need you to help market my business. We need— and that's not what we do, you know, that's more chamber-esque, for example. So we are the, we are the people on the front end that once the business has decided their location, that they're coming to wherever, Tiffin or Republic or Attica or Bettsville, we do all of that work on the front end to get them there and to kind of get them on their way to construction. Maybe there's some incentives that are required, maybe it's a jobs creation tax credit, Maybe they're going into an Opportunity Zone, maybe a Community Reinvestment Area. We take care of all of those applications. So that's a big part of the job is just project management. Right now we're upgrading our software. We're switching from one CRM to another, which won't bore you with the details, but so we don't have accurate numbers, but I know the last report that we had before we started the data migration, we've got something like 86 active projects between— in all of Seneca County that we're currently managing, and that's with a staff of actually that do economic development of 3. We have Karina who does our operations, but me, Donna, and Adam do economic development. So yeah, you can imagine the amount of work and time that it goes into of managing, you know, 86, 87 projects with 3 people. But we do that, we do it very well. And then other things is also the relationship building. So finding that a business is struggling in some way and they need help, and who are those connections in the community? Do they need an architect to come in with something and they just don't know where to start? Maybe they, they need to take marketing classes because they have no idea how to market their business. Well, we don't — we're not marketers, we don't teach the classes, but we can put them into connections with people, whether that's the Small Business Administration for grants and loans that they may need. We have partners at Terra State, which is the community college. That's where the Small Business Development Center is located. So it's— we know with our small staff we can't offer every service, so part of it is also us knowing who offers every service so that we can start to make those connections. So a lot of time it's, hey, I know your business needs help with marketing. We don't do that, but let's sit down and talk with Miranda at the Small Business Development Center and we can, we can get you the help that you may need. Here's free classes that are offered. All you got to do is show up and sign up. No charge at all. So a lot of that we try to facilitate different assistance for businesses and then, of course, also facilitate lots of different grants studies. We write grants for sometimes the city, sometimes the county, some of our villages, or if a business brings us a grant that they're struggling with, maybe the paperwork's too difficult for a small business, we will offer our services to also help with that. So we're really kind of like that Swiss Army knife in the tool chest for economic development. There's really nothing that we'll, we'll say no to. Now, we may say we can't do it, but we'll find who can help you for it. But, um, we're—

**J****Jason Duff** 27:37

yeah, we— right, yeah, we're—

**A****Aaron Montz** 27:38

it's fun.

**J****Jason Duff** 27:39

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 a 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. If you're a small business owner, I think that the key message is you need to reach out to to find these resources. The resources are there and there are people that want to help you. And I think one of the barriers is, is sometimes people believe, I can't afford membership to that organization, so I don't ask. And really, in the case of economic development, there's no cost to get access to you. That is correct. Now, there are options to join if you getting benefit, uh, for your business. There are, there are always, uh, opportunities to, to, to, to join and become a member. We want to see that in our communities.

**A****Aaron Montz** 28:51

Yeah, yeah, and that's what's great with us. We will help anyone. Too often my biggest frustration in the job is when I go through, and usually it's not the downtown businesses because there's not as many programs for them, but if I go to a manufacturer, whoever it may be, and I find out they just added \$2 million worth of an addition to their building or machinery, and I'm like, well, we literally could have gotten you some grant money for this if we just would have known about it. And it's the same thing with smaller businesses. We try to help everyone we can. You don't have to be a member. We are a member-driven organization in the fact that that's how we're funded. We've got about 80 businesses and organizations throughout the community that are at different membership levels. But a lot of them are members of our organization because they understand the greater good that by me giving my \$5,000 director-level membership, for example, I am not only supporting my own business, this allows Donna, for example, to recruit more businesses downtown, which then I'm able to recruit a CFO for my business next time I need one easier because there's cool places to eat and shop and do those things downtown. It— that you have to kind of buy into that bigger belief. It's not, well, if I'm a member of TSEP, I'm going to get 15% off at this business. And that's not what we have for Facebook posts. Yeah, yeah, yeah. That is not— yeah, you are buying into our organization because it's kind of the rising tide lifts all boats. And by us recruiting more businesses and right now we're trying to focus on bringing more housing to the community. That will help you in your business, just maybe not in a way that you get 15% off your, your printing supplies at this place or whatever it may be. Yeah.

**J****Jason Duff** 30:22

And Don, I imagine that similar premise is important for Main Street.

**D****Donna Gross** 30:26

Absolutely. Our Main Street is a little bit different than most Main Streets. We are not membership-based because we are under TCAP, the economic development organization, which is pretty awesome.

**J****Jason Duff** 30:40

Yeah. The way that that, that structure.

**D****Donna Gross** 30:42

And here's the benefit. One of the benefits for that is we're not competing with our Chamber of Commerce to, you know, get those \$150, \$200 memberships from our downtown establishments. And because of that, we work together so well with our Chamber of Commerce. We plan events together. They— we sit on each other's boards and help each other with volunteer in our committees. So it works so well. That our chamber and our tourism, we actually share office space with them. And I can just walk right down the hallway and we can talk about whatever we need to. But that's the beauty of our Main Street program being under our economic development.

**A****Aaron Montz** 31:24

It also leads to tons of confusion, though. I mean, we—

**J****Jason Duff** 31:27

yeah, sure.

**A****Aaron Montz** 31:27

We love the Chamber and Visitors Bureau. They love us. We work so great together. But people all the time are confused that they don't understand. They think they're part of our organization. Well, I've, you know, I'm a member of— Yeah, there's a lot.

**J****Jason Duff** 31:39

Well, I think that's, that's pretty common in a lot of communities. So if you don't mind, just take a couple of minutes here and explain what some of the differences are between the two organizations.

**A****Aaron Montz** 31:46

Yeah. Yeah. Well, kind of like I mentioned with the down— or with, with TSEP overall, Tiffin-Seneca Economic Partnership, TSEP, too much of a mouthful to use the acronym. So TSEP from here on out. So our organization, we're so project driven, whereas the chamber does a lot more of educational events. They're constantly doing different marketing for businesses, ribbon cuttings. Open houses, After Five events, which is where it's a large-scale business open house, you know, small business blitzes type of things. That's the chamber, whereas we're the project team. That's why you don't see tons of marketing from us and all these promotions, because our job is to get the project off the ground. Economic development is, is a, is a really goofy world because you spend tons of time on, on individual projects. And the sad part is 10 to 20% of those actually happen at the most. So, you know, the amount of time— like these 86 projects, or 87, wherever we're sitting right now— that we have, we'll probably see anywhere from 10 to 12 of those actually come to 100% fruition as they are right now. But you don't know. You don't want to not give the time of day to a new manufacturer that is trying to choose between 10 locations and is going to bring 500 jobs, because those are 500 jobs and huge investment. It could completely change your school district for the better. It can change your community for the better with that tax base coming in. And, and if you don't give it the time of day and spend just as much time on it knowing you're probably not going to win it, you're missing a lot of opportunities. So it's, it's kind of one of those jobs that there's a lot of days you kind of beat yourself up because you're constantly thinking, well gosh, we were, we were third out of 10, or we were second out of 10, and what could we have done better? And in some cases, at the end of the day, it's literally nothing. They may just have liked the individual that they dealt with more. They might have liked maybe a feature in the downtown. It's some of the goofiest reasons that you hear that you weren't selected. But there has to be a team working at these things. And a lot of the times, because everything is so secretive, especially with economic development, because of competition, we codename everything because that's how most of this is.

**J****Jason Duff** 33:54

A serious operation. Oh, yes.

**A****Aaron Montz** 33:56

It's highly competitive. And, and that's what's— it's exciting because I'm, I'm very into sports. I'm a huge Ohio State fan. I played baseball in school. But yeah, it's extremely competitive, but you will not have a batting average that you'd be happy with in baseball in a lot of these projects. And downtown, I think, is a little different because more people who come to downtown want to be there. But our bigger economic development projects, whether they're warehousing, data centers, manufacturers, you do have a lot of strikeouts.

**J****Jason Duff** 34:25

Yeah, I was going to say, I feel like it's pretty, pretty common overall to hear, you know, economic professionals go on the lookout for substantial employers or working on retention for the businesses that they do have. But I'm curious, Donna, to hear from you about what some of those strategies that you take or that may be different from that kind of approach as you focus in on downtown.

**D****Donna Gross** 34:45

So like Aaron said, downtown's a little bit different. We're about 95% occupied. So we really just have a few storefronts that are available.

**J****Jason Duff** 34:53

So if a business put a button on that 95% occupied, they're doing something really nice.

**D****Donna Gross** 34:59

So people call me on a weekly basis, hey, I want to open up this business, you know, what do you have downtown? Well, I've got these 3 spaces.

**A****Aaron Montz** 35:06

Yeah, she's not kidding.

**D****Donna Gross** 35:08

So it's a, it's a little different approach. They're not looking at other towns around. They, they really want to be downtown Tiffin. And this happened twice this year. I said, you know, we really don't have anything or anything that would work for you. And then another business that was already established downtown wanted to move to one of those spaces. And then the shift started to happen. And this particular client, she has a pet grooming. She loved this new little space that the record store moved out of, and it worked perfectly. So sometimes it just takes that little shift and then everyone can, can move a little bit.

**J****Jason Duff** 35:44

Yeah, appreciate you. By having and placing value on historic preservation, and seeing investment in your downtown. I run into a number of people on the public side that really believe it is the private side's responsibility to buy these buildings, you know, spend the dollars and the money. But those of us that have been on the private side understand that the— especially in the beginning, the economic metrics to save and restore historic buildings just don't work. Aaron, you're now— you've now been on both sides of the equation, and can you kind of speak to things that you think now in the lenses that you have that mayors that might be listening should be doing to prepare their towns and invest in the infrastructure in their towns to develop that preservation ethic?

A

**Aaron Montz** 36:37

Yeah, you 100% have to when it comes to downtowns, um, because the return on investment is never there for what you can build. That's the reason why malls shopping centers, and that became so popular because these downtown buildings are beautiful. Uh, in many cases they're built like an army tank, but the problem is that you're talking extremely solid walls, you're talking things that take a lot of money to fix or to move. Um, let's face it, people were much different back when our downtown buildings were built. You know, you look at a lot of even your historic homes, tiny, tiny little kitchens, extremely small bathrooms. You'll have a, a 6 or 8 bedroom home. And it's got one tiny bathroom in the thing and an itty-bitty little kitchen. So it takes so much money to go into these buildings versus just building new, but the value in saving them is absolutely huge. If, if your downtown was an all-new downtown, you know, if you — let's say you completely bulldoze downtown Tiffin, downtown Bellefontaine, wherever, and put in an all-new, it's not going to have anything special. It's going to look like a bunch of cookie cutters where everything looks the same. And it's that that new brick that's supposed to look old that really doesn't look old. Yeah. And it— like, I come to downtown Bellefontaine a few times a year. We pass through here. We have family in Beaver Creek. And you drive through and it's— every building looks different. You can tell they're old, but they look different. And that's what's special about it. And it's unique. And you just want to keep looking at the next one. So I wonder what's in the next building. I wonder what's in the next building. You have that with downtown Tiffin. You don't have that if, if we bulldozed everything and just put up these cookie cutter buildings. But I know during my time with Mayor, one of the things I did when I was mayor was created with the city, a facade enhancement program. And every year we put \$100,000 into this program. Business owners can apply directly with the city, right on our website. Now it's a form — their website, sorry, not ours. I haven't been there for 2 years plus now. On the city website, on a form, and you can apply for 50% of your external facade renovations on your building. And you can apply every year if you choose. And with that, and I don't know the exact numbers, Donna may have a better quote, but I know the city has invested well under \$1 million into the program. And there's been, I don't know, \$4, \$4.5 million of investment that's come from the private sector because—

J

**Jason Duff** 38:52

4 times leverage. That's great.

A

**Aaron Montz** 38:54

Oh, yeah. Yeah. I mean, you tell any investor, give you 4 to 1 on your return, and people are going to sign up all day long for this. And by doing that, we have not lost, I don't think, any buildings in the downtown other than ones that, you know, maybe had a fire or were completely condemned to the point that they were unsafe, like not just condemned because it's bad condition inside. We're talking like walls falling in. We haven't lost anything because people are taking care of that building envelope, which is, you know, Jason, the most important thing. It's not the cool floor, the cool ceiling, that— it's the building envelope, the windows, the door jambs, the brickwork, roofing.

J

**Jason Duff** 39:31

If water starts to get into a property, the amount of damage that can happen quickly is devastating.

A

**Aaron Montz** 39:37

Yeah, water damage is the worst thing on earth other than a fire. In these historic buildings, water damage will destroy it. And of course, when you have a fire, what do they put on it to put it out? So it literally is just— yeah, yeah. So, but that's— you have to save the buildings. Um, it really— one of the first things that put it in my mind when I was mayor, um, was when we were recruiting, we had Rural King coming to Tiffin, Ohio. Now, they're not a downtown business, but there's a story to it. So their CEO, who at the time, I've got to guess, was in his mid-30s, 40 at the oldest or so, flew in at Tiffin Airport. I picked him up as mayor and I said, okay, let's head to the location. Him and a couple of the guys he brought along. And they said, no, no, we're not going to the location. I want to drive your streets and take me through downtown, he said, because your streets and your downtown literally show me what your community is like. He goes, you don't have to tell me any stories. About, oh, we've got the greatest this, we got the greatest that. And people— so he goes, your condition of your streets and your downtown will tell me what I will tell me everything I need to know about, is this a community that will be supportive of our store? So I'm like, wow, okay.

J

**Jason Duff** 40:44

So, you know, in your head you're thinking, oh God, where do I take it? Turn on down.

A

**Aaron Montz** 40:49

So, you know, and, and that stuck with me. And you don't know how many times I've heard since then people remark that we moved to Tiffin from Colorado or We had actually a New York Times bestselling author and her husband moved to Tiffin. She wrote one of the Star Wars books, like huge people. They never had been to Tiffin until they purchased their home and they bought it because of everything they read online and saw about the downtown and how cool and welcoming of a place it was. And we've heard this story time and time again, people that work at Google remotely that are trying to get out of states like California and where taxes are just so high and they're coming to places like Tiffin and that's why we have a housing crisis. Places now. There are literally no houses on the market. One of them goes up, you have a bidding war like crazy, people paying way over what they're valued at. And yeah, we've created our own monster locally, and in a good way. I'd rather be on this side of the equation than the other side.

J

**Jason Duff** 41:44

But which, you know, we— housing has become a topic. We've been interviewing, um, developers of home lots to really try to understand like what they need. And of course, like every community starts talking about utilities is infrastructure, zoning. But the difference is, and that's kind of what you mentioned, if they, you know, you have a historic downtown that's working, you have higher education, you know, in case of Tiffin, really great universities in town, those are the desirable places. So, you know, if it's getting all the pieces to the puzzle in place, but when it comes down to incentives, this is where I think people freak out because like getting city council to sign on this commitment or the school board to give up, you know, this tax abatement. How do you approach those conversations to really understand if it's good for the community or not?

**A****Aaron Montz** 42:37

Yeah, and I think in my perspective, it's so much different than most because I've been on that side of the table. So I feel like I've had that perspective to sit down and explain it. And you have to look at it because every incentive is different. You know, one of our most utilized incentives are our CRA, our community reinvestment area. And we've got 5 of those in Tiffin. There's a couple out in the county. And what we constantly talk about is, you know, if we're able to land this business and they utilize the CRA and maybe they're getting a 50% abatement, maybe it's a 75% abatement, in some cases there are 100% abatements on the property taxes, you have to understand you're still getting, in any case that's less than 100, you're still getting—

**J****Jason Duff** 43:15

You're getting more.

**A****Aaron Montz** 43:15

—new tax revenue. And at the same time, those abatements do not last forever. In many cases they're 5, 10-year abatements. So after that point, you're still getting 100% of the new tax value. But if we don't bring this business to Tiffin or to wherever in Seneca County, you're getting nothing. But it's about building that, that, like you said, the piece of the pie that makes that community an attractive destination that people want to come visit or live in. Because it's happening a lot more often than I think people realize, of people wanting to get out of other states and they're looking at places like Ohio that is extremely affordable to live. That do not have business regulations, you know, like crazy, that you have to jump through 20 hoops of fire before you can even open your business or do a small expansion. And we want to be right there with the open catcher's mitt, ready to catch as many of them as we can. And that's where your downtown gives you opportunity. One, it really can be your heartbeat and your crown jewel. But two, all of those upper floors downtown, Yeah, you don't have to worry about running new utilities for all of these like you do.

**J****Jason Duff** 44:21

You have the density and you've got the utilities and you've got all of the amenities in walking distance. And you could not be speaking the, the, the, the evangelizing that any better because that is really the message for why. And we're seeing the pendulum shift. Developers are interested in working on upper floors in downtown now. But I think we've got a focus of working with our public partners on some of those tools that you mentioned, Aaron, with the facade grant program and, you know, bringing some incentives to the table that help those big checks come in and those projects get, get them moving.

A

**Aaron Montz** 44:58

Yeah, you have to incentivize some of these things. They're just not going to happen organically. When you get to a point of a critical mass, it's almost like the snowball running, rolling down the hill. You'll have people coming in because then everybody wants to be a part of the winning team with things going on. But until you can build that point, you have to incentivize things to happen. And at the end of the day, you have to look at the return on investment. And if your community is still coming out ahead, what's wrong with some incentives to continue to make the community better? You know, don't give away the kitchen sink. Don't, don't give 100% abatement for 100 years and say, oh, please, we'll do anything. That's not the way to look at it. But when you can give an incentive, especially somewhere in the 50 to 75% range for 10 years, that's great because the school district's still getting more tax revenue. Local government's still getting more tax revenue. And you got to think about the tax revenue you're also collecting from those people who are living there, their salaries, income tax, the money that they're spending at the downtown restaurants and bars and boutique stores. Um, there you can't just look at it as we gave some property tax money away. You're still coming out well ahead in the game if you're doing anything short of 100%. And in some cases, you can make a very logical argument that even at 100%, you are gaining because of income taxes, sales taxes. Yeah, it's about community development. It's about leaving the community in a better place than you found it. And that's really what the number one focus should be of every elected official.

J

**Jason Duff** 46:21

So Donna, this is your chance to brag a little bit. Tourism, you know, it's not only the local people that are in Seneca County, but you happen to be on part of the track for people that are living here as we go north, there's this place called Sandusky and Cedar Point. And Tiffin, I know my path and a lot of people in this region as they're driving right through. What do you think are the brag points for people that maybe haven't been back to Tiffin recently? Those business types, or you can give even a few shoutouts of like what the favorite menu items are, what people talk about that when you go to Tiffin, you've got to see or eat or do this.

D

**Donna Gross** 47:02

So being a Heidelberg grad, I have a lot of friends that are alum that love to come back for homecoming alumni weekend. And I hear this every time, "Oh my gosh, I went to Reno's Pizza. I used to go there when I was in college. I can't believe how downtown Tiffin looks now. There's, you know, bistros and bourbon bar and boutiques and it's just—" Bookstore.

J

**Jason Duff** 47:24

"And a bookstore." So many towns are jealous that you guys have a bookstore.

D

**Donna Gross** 47:27

Oh, I love our bookstore. It's charming. It's everything you would think in like a movie. It's just, it's, Pantheon Bookstore is amazing. We just had a Coastal Swing and Golf open up. They had a place on Catawba Island. They opened one in Tiffin. It's an indoor simulator golf, you know, golfing simulator.

J

**Jason Duff** 47:44

Yeah, those are huge right now.

D

**Donna Gross** 47:45

But it has this really cool bar in there too with this beautiful granite or marble countertop. And you walk in, you're like, I'm in Tiffin. Oh my gosh.

J

**Jason Duff** 47:52

You got to get there. We got to get there. And then in the same light, I'm going to give you guys a chance to say, I know both of you know and talk to people that say, man, we're missing this. We have a lot of listeners on the podcast that have certain small businesses around town. What is it that you say people ask and really wish we had more of this? I hear pet store.

D

**Donna Gross** 48:13

Pet store. Cute little, like a really cute little—

J

**Jason Duff** 48:16

because you've got a groomer. We talked, we talked about the groomer earlier.

D

**Donna Gross** 48:19

Yeah, people love their pets. They're like their children.

J

**Jason Duff** 48:22

Sometimes people love their pets more than their children. I've heard that statement before too. So you've got goats?

A

**Aaron Montz** 48:28

I have goats and dogs. Okay, nice.

J

**Jason Duff** 48:31

I have dogs and goats. Yes. Anything else before—

D

**Donna Gross** 48:33

a men's store, like a men's clothing store. Yeah, um, get in line.

**J****Jason Duff** 48:38

Yeah, we've heard that too. Yeah, and a little grocery store, um, and somewhere you can buy grab-and-go kind of stuff. We've heard that too. Well, and again, those of you that are listening, that is an entrepreneurial opportunity. I always give Mike Hibner a shout out. Yeah, from Coldwater, Ohio, because he and his wife just took over the men's store there, Mr. Shop, and it is just exploding. And so if we can get more of those types of businesses, there's a need in a lot of towns to cover that. The ladies deserve their boutiques, and there's some really nice boutiques, but the guys want some nice clothes too. So yeah, cool. That's great. As you guys are thinking about the next 5, 10 years, what are you, what are you most excited for with with, you know, the area and just what's developing with your organization?

**A****Aaron Montz** 49:25

Yeah, I think with us in Tiffin and Seneca County, I think we're going to continue to see the momentum really continue in downtown, but also in rural parts of the county. You know, we've got so many good employers on the, even outside of Tiffin, because a lot of folks forget that we have Arm Hammer, Church Dwight, one of their largest plants, which is out in rural Old Fort in Seneca County. You know, this little tiny village Yet we have Arm Hammer that employs hundreds of people. My prediction, I made it at our annual meeting last year, I said I have a feeling the next 10 years, if not sooner, probably sooner, that they're going to be the largest employer in the county with just the amount of growth that they're doing. So, wow. If you buy Arm Hammer laundry pods, they were probably at some point processed in Seneca County. It's amazing to watch. I could sit and watch that machine all day long fill those little pods and they go flying. It's kind kind of mesmerizing to watch. But, um, yeah, we're going to continue to see growth because we have the right leaders in place. Everyone continues to work together, and as long as we continue to work together and everybody's singing from the same sheet of music, it makes my job and my team's job so much easier to recruit jobs and investment into the community. Um, we're very close on a boutique hotel downtown that we're really thrilled about. We've had so many people approach us recently about just opening businesses. How do we get involved? How do we do this? It really is a great place to be. And I think the next 5 to 10 years, we're not going to see any sort of a slowdown unless, unfortunately, you know, unless really we'd be our own worst enemies. I think we're in the driver's seat. And as long as we continue doing what we're doing and work together, the sky really is the limit for Tiffin and Seneca County. Great.

**D****Donna Gross** 51:07

And I really see a shift. Aaron was talking about when he graduated from school, all his friends, oh, we're going to go to college, we're going to move you know, out of Tiffin, I see such a shift right now of all these young couples that are either staying or coming back, young families. And a lot of our events have children's activities that the kids can have a lot of fun with as well. Because I, I see that shift. There's a lot of young families that are staying because Tiffin's a great place to live and raise a family.

**J****Jason Duff** 51:33

Yeah, that's exciting. Very cool. All right. Well, we are coming up close on our time here. So I'm going to transition us into the next show segment and I am actually going to pivot here and do a tour takeaway segment here. Ooh, cool. So I know Aaron, you've been in town several times, but Donna, this is your first time in downtown Bellefontaine today, right? Yes. Nick showed you around a little bit. So what is one thing that you guys just took away as you're walking around the streets of Bellefontaine today?

**D****Donna Gross** 52:02

Well, the pizza was amazing. Yes.

**J****Jason Duff** 52:04

I joined you for lunch and I am still stuffed. It was very good. Was Brittany in there when you were there? The owner? Uh, we were sitting outside, so I'm not sure if she was there or not.

**D****Donna Gross** 52:13

She's cool too. And speaking of outside, I love the outdoor seating areas, um, that are outside a couple of the restaurants.

**J****Jason Duff** 52:19

What a great idea. The streeteries and that concept, it just happened. It was pretty easy. It was so easy. We actually have unpacked that on previous episodes because, you know, there were 3 public parking spaces that had to be, um, utilized for a— for— it was like, we were really good timing— for a for-profit private developer to be able to sell, you know, liquor and pizza on that patio. So taking that to city council, that was a very spirited conversation. But here's the good thing. Not only did that happen, it inspired several other streeteries in the downtown that are working. And so we use that as a model to help other towns just like it be able to do that. So I'm glad you got to enjoy that today.

**D****Donna Gross** 52:59

We also love the wayfindings.

**A****Aaron Montz** 53:01

That was what I was going to say. Yeah, the wayfinding signs. So We, uh, we did a really good job. It's— I bet it's been 8 to 10 years ago with wayfinding downtown, but ours were mainly vehicular wayfinding. I love your— I don't know what exactly you call them, but the poles with the different signs on there. And we were just talking about how that'd be a great idea for us to take back and run through our design committee and potentially implement in Tiffin, because the more you think about it, when you're parking downtown That's the way to also direct people to maybe do a little bit more shopping, dining, whatever it may be. Then, okay, it's great that you're in your car and you can find where this place is, the major landmarks, but what are we doing to also show them that there's some other businesses throughout our downtown that maybe you had no intention of visiting today from out of town, but you see those signs? So I would love to see us come up with something similar in our downtown, which is why we like to do these visits. We love to go to other downtowns. We love the food. It's not just about, you know, sure, but most of it is about the learning. Yeah, yeah, because we are not, we are not at all, um, too proud to steal good ideas. And that is the best—

**J****Jason Duff** 54:12

we call it, uh, re-R&D, uh, rip and duplicate. But, you know, you heard, uh, Aaron and Donna talking about that's the proper way to get your wayfinding or those business wayfinding signs implemented The method that we employed is that on a Sunday afternoon, I removed 6 bricks, and a friend and I augured a hole, and we had 3 bags of Quikrete, and we put one up right in front of the chamber office. The next day, the city engineer and the mayor called pretty pissed off and said, who did this? I said, the zoning code gives me 28 days to have a public art experiment. And so the good thing is enough businesses benefited on the side streets that we all to city council, we work with Planning Commission and got that change. But now there are 8 of those pedestals, um, and I think over, um, 400 of those signs that on an annual basis generates about \$8,000 a year to plant our flower pots here in town. And so it's been a, a win-win project. But the, um, we appreciate you noticing that, and I encourage you, rip and duplicate. Yeah, we plan to. Love it. All right, just a few closing questions here, and, uh, the first one is, what is one professional development resource that was impactful for you along your professional journeys? Oh my gosh, where do I begin?

**A****Aaron Montz** 55:24

I know it's hard to pick one. Yeah, yeah, yeah. One that was most— I, man, I guess since we're kind of downtown focused, I'm going to say the Heritage Ohio organization, and especially their annual conference and whatnot. Not even necessarily the educational things that they put on there, but the networking that I've been able to do, whether it was— so this is like the first year, this year, that I don't get to go to it because OEDA, which is the Ohio Economic Development Association, switched a training that to go to. So this is like the first time I have to miss it, and I'm like actually upset about it. Like, because the people that you meet that then you can use as a resource later on— that, yeah, you have a great conversation over a glass of wine or whatever, but then, oh my gosh, 3 years later you're like, oh, the, the gentleman that I talked to that owns a boutique hotel, and we're trying to get it, and I can call him now as a resource. Um, that, that networking that I was able to do through different Heritage Ohio, that to me has just been huge when it comes to downtown development. The countless people I've met that are permanent resources now for me. Yeah, that's great.

**J****Jason Duff** 56:30

That's a great choice.

**D****Donna Gross** 56:31

And 4 times a year, Heritage Ohio does training for us managers. So there's about 20 different communities in the state of Ohio that are in the Main Street program. So 4 times a year we get together as managers and bounce ideas off each other. Sometimes it's a bit of a therapy session. Sure. It depends. It depends. Yeah. Any event, but, um, that's—

**J****Jason Duff** 56:51

it's priceless. Great, I love that. Um, and then where can people learn more about the work that you guys are doing and follow the organization?

**D****Donna Gross** 56:59

So we have our [downtowntiffin.org](http://downtowntiffin.org) website. Um, you can go there. Yep.

**A****Aaron Montz** 57:04

And we have [tiffinseneca.org](http://tiffinseneca.org), which is our overarching organization's website. There's a link to downtown. And then we have every social media, I think, that exists short of TikTok, because I'm, I'm almost 40 and I just kind of got out of creating.

**J****Jason Duff** 57:17

Hey, don't blame you.

**A****Aaron Montz** 57:18

Yep.

J

**Jason Duff** 57:18

I've got another tool to maintain.

A

**Aaron Montz** 57:20

Yeah. And then we have our own podcast, Seneca Spotlight, where we interview different business owners. We talk about their entrepreneurship journey and what it is to them to be a business owner in Seneca County and to kind of encourage other entrepreneurs in the county to do things. So lots of ways to keep up with us.

J

**Jason Duff** 57:35

Yeah. Awesome. Thanks for sharing. We'll link that in the show notes. And, you know, Donna, Aaron, thank you for sharing your perspectives and advice. Guys, I love today hearing from the public position, all the lenses that you had, and now, you know, kind of serving at the, the Economic Development, and of course with Youth Main Street, and being a business owner. Guys, this is probably again the secret sauce to Tiffin. They have these roles in the— they're not just, you know, people holding a title. They're actually doing and working together too. And that was the thing, your communication style and keeping everyone working together. So Thanks for sharing all that advice on the show today.

A

**Aaron Montz** 58:11

Love to be a guest.

D

**Donna Gross** 58:13

Thank you for having us.

E

**Ethan DeLeon** 58:14

Thanks for tuning in on this episode of the Small Nation Podcast.

E

**Ethan DeLeon** 58:16

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