

Episode 104

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SPEAKERS

Jason Duff, Christina Muryn, Ethan DeLeon

C Christina Muryn 00:00

We all want a lot of the same things, but how do we make sure that we're positioning our communities to have something a little bit unique to make us attractive? We can't all be, you know, Bellefontaine's incredible. You guys have done some really different things. You also have a different population of people that are coming in with Mad River and with the lake. So how do we have a similar retail culture recognizing that our population is different?

E Ethan DeLeon 00:25

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J Jason Duff 00:44

Hi guys, I'm Jason Duff. Welcome to the Small Nation Podcast. I am really excited to have in the studio today Mayor Christina Murrin from Findlay, Ohio. Welcome. Woo.

C Christina Muryn 00:54

Yeah, Findlay.

J Jason Duff 00:54

Yeah, so we had the, the pleasure of hosting Mayor Murrin today. She had me to Findlay, Ohio, My colleague Davis Norris and I visited probably about 4 months ago, walking the streets, touring some buildings, eating some great foods. We also had a Dietz Brothers chocolate stop, which—

C Christina Muryn 01:13

The essentials, obviously.

J Jason Duff 01:15

The Findlay essentials. But long time, you know, for people that know me, I was a student at Ohio Northern, you know, just a few decades ago. But when we would be in Ada, we loved to get away and travel to the big city. which you kind of had 2 options. There was Lima, Ohio or Findlay, Ohio. And no disrespect to Lima, 'cause Kewpie, there's some good things going on there, but Findlay, Ohio was really special to us. And so it's awesome to have you, Mayor, here today. And then you had the chance to visit with us in Bellefontaine.

E Ethan DeLeon 01:48

Yeah.

J Jason Duff 01:48

In fact, we had pizza today at 600 Downtown, and hopefully neither you or I, we had a few pizzas. If you hear a burp on the podcast, we're just gonna accept for permission now.

C Christina Muryn 01:59

like a 4-star rating. Yes, Google Reviews.

J Jason Duff 02:02

You know it's that good. You know it's that good when that happens. But no, I am excited to interview you today and really unpack some secrets and lessons around Findlay, Ohio, because you were born and raised there, right?

C Christina Muryn 02:17

Yes. Yep, it's my home for sure.

J Jason Duff 02:18

Well, there is a secret sauce that Findlay has that I'd like to unpack with you today. There is this term that other economic developers and leaders around the state talk about, which is this Findlay Formula.

C Christina Muryn 02:30

Yes.

J Jason Duff 02:31

So tell us about Findlay, Ohio, and what makes Findlay, Ohio special.

C Christina Muryn 02:35

Yeah, so, well, so many things make Findlay special. Obviously, just the people and kind of the energy that we have. But the Findlay Formula is really talking about how do government, business, and education partner together to work to improve our community and making sure that we're all rowing in the same direction. And it was really coined by Site Selection Magazine after we won the Top Micropolitan Award a couple years in a row. They said, what's so special about Findlay, Ohio? How do they keep achieving at this high level? And it's something that we have— has always just been a part of our DNA, but also takes a lot of intentionality. And it was great to have that recognized on a national and international scale.

J Jason Duff 03:19

Well-deserved recognition. For folks that have never been to Findlay, Ohio, can you kind of anchor us of where you're at. Tell us about the county, what kind of the makeup of the community is.

C Christina Muryn 03:29

Yeah, so we're in Northwest Ohio, right on I-75 between Toledo and Lima, and we are anchored by Marathon Petroleum World Headquarters is right in our downtown. We have the University of Findlay, Blanchard Valley Health System, but we also are right between, you know, Detroit and then Marysville. So we actually have a lot of tier 2 automotive suppliers tied to Honda and GM, Ford, Jeep, All of those. But we also just are really kind of entrepreneurial spirit. So we have a lot of locally started businesses, Ohio Logistics, Create, and Finley Machine and Tool. So we just have a very diverse economy with a beautiful downtown. So I always tell people that it is a really good mix of like small town character and, you know, some of the simplicities that come with that, not having a ton of traffic, not having a ton of crime, but also the big city amenities with our beautiful performing arts center and sporting events. And so we're really fortunate. And then you have great access to so many things because within a 100-mile radius of Findlay, we're the center, obviously. And then you have Detroit, Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton, and Fort Wayne all within 100 miles.

J Jason Duff 04:39

Well, a lot of people ask, like, what are the ingredients to make up a successful town and community? And I think that that's a very authentic, original thing for a town. Like, when you think of Finley's DNA of the community that you grew up in and are now serving as a public servant and leader, what are those ingredients that you think are really special?

C Christina Muryn 05:03

Obviously, it just, I think working together and having a vision for the future, focusing on quality of life with a strong economy. I would say that those are really the 3 main focus, and all of those are underpinned by safety, and good infrastructure and just good operations. But I think one of the things that has always put us in a really strong position is that we've always been forward-looking. And again, that doesn't mean that we have to be something different than what we are, but it's how do we make sure that we continue to be the best, um, and, and kind of evolve with culture, right? So one of the things that we've really been focused on is that quality of life amenity because young people and young families looking to come to our area, whether it's for a job or they're moving back close to family, that dynamic has changed. And so looking just for a good job, good schools, and a nice house is no longer sufficient to make sure that we continue to be competitive, to make sure that those folks want to call Findlay home.

J Jason Duff 06:03

You know, nothing is ever stagnant. It's always evolving and changing. And I think those examples that you share in Findlay are one of the reasons why your community is hitting way above its belt. How much of those changes do you think have been intentional versus organic? And maybe why are both of those important?

C Christina Muryn 06:25

I would say a lot of it has been intentional, but then I definitely believe that success breeds success. And so as we have been intentional about our local businesses being successful and continuing to invest in our neighborhoods and continuing to set ourselves apart with big community issues like flood mitigations, like park developments, and strong schools. That has then led to people recognizing that we are a community that when you choose us, we commit to you and that you're going to be successful. And so that continues to support the reinvestment with expansion, but also new businesses coming into the region.

J Jason Duff 07:04

I appreciate that. And kind of diving deeper, we talk a lot about public-private partnerships. And you mentioned the theater renovation, which I know was a really big one, but also uncovering things like the challenge of the floods. I mean, that's one of the unique situations of Ohio being relatively flat. And you've got assets of rivers in your area, which are assets, but in the case when they flood, that can become a liability.

C Christina Muryn 07:30

Yeah, definitely. So we have to be really focused on moving forward, right? 'Cause you're right, things are always changing. If you're not moving forward, you're moving backwards. Or we say, if you're not living every day, then you're dying. And so how do we make sure that we are leveraging our natural resources and the river. I would say that that is definitely a challenge point for us, and it's taken literally 2 decades since the 2007 flood to really make meaningful progress on that.

J Jason Duff 07:57

Mm-hmm.

C Christina Muryn 07:58

And we needed to make sure that we weren't just solving the problem, but leveraging all of this investment to really set us apart. And so that's why we've been working on the Downtown Recreation Area, which is a 19-acre park right in our downtown on land that previously was buildings that unfortunately had to be torn down because of repeat flooding. So as we are making that progress with the flood mitigation, how do we make sure that it is also something really special that is gonna set us up for decades? You know, it's a generational improvement into our community, and it was something that we had to move very quickly on because of the timeframe with the flood projects to be able to get it done. And I know that it's going to be, you know, our community's new living room, which will be really special.

J Jason Duff 08:42

And are there examples of organizations that exist in your community that you've really established those public-private partnerships? And for anyone listening, like, how do you seek those, find those, build those key community partners?

C Christina Muryn 08:56

Yeah, so definitely, obviously, our key business stakeholders, because they want Findlay to be a great place that they can continue to recruit to. Working with our downtown business owners and our Downtown Findlay Improvement District to say, hey, what are the challenges you're seeing? What investments are you making? And I always tell people, I can't solve problems I'm not aware of. So any— I can't— it doesn't mean I'm going to have the easy solution for you, but I can't help if I don't know about it. And so, you know, we talk anything from businesses that are struggling to recruit to businesses that need, you know, grants to expand their business to, you know, we brought up the performing arts Center. I was really fortunate that that project was completed before my tenure, but that was the Finley City Schools saying, hey, this is a building that we no longer need. One of our community priorities is having a performing arts center, and then getting the community stakeholders with Marathon Petroleum and other key individuals to step up and fund that project. And now it is a glowing—

E Ethan DeLeon 09:57

It's beautiful.

C Christina Muryn 09:58

Event space in our community that brings in Broadway shows all the way down to monthly folk music settings, and then also our children's education programs and the youth theater. So it is constantly busy, and that's a really great example, but it's also very challenging. And so how do I as mayor make sure I continue to identify areas of opportunity or catalytic investment and then help share that story of what the vision is so that partners that may be interested can step up But then we can also keep it on our list to be able to say what opportunities are out there through state or federal funding to really make this happen.

J Jason Duff 10:37

You became mayor how many years ago?

C Christina Muryn 10:40

I think I'm in year 8. So February of 2019.

J Jason Duff 10:44

And how old were you at that time when you became mayor?

C Christina Muryn 10:46

27.

J Jason Duff 10:47

So just double-clicking on that, probably one of the youngest mayors in Ohio, but probably the youngest mayor ever in Findlay's history.

C Christina Muryn 10:55

You know, people ask me this, and I probably should know that data point. I don't, but I would assume so, yes. But yeah, definitely one of the youngest in the state. It's definitely the youngest of a major city. And so, yes, Findlay is a major city. I know people may not think that, but I do.

J Jason Duff 11:12

It sure is, yeah.

C Christina Muryn 11:13

And yeah, and I took a lot of heat early on from people saying, oh, 27, like, she's not ready to do this. Who is this young thing that thinks she can run the city? So I was really focused on just showing people that I could do the job. I never doubted myself of, I know how to run an organization, I know how to manage people, I had the skill set. My background is economics, marketing, and finance. And so I knew that I was prepared. And in my position in the private sector, I was negotiating deals and dealing with legal contracts and financial pro formas. So I was not intimidated by the, the position and the work that I have to do. Obviously, the hardest part is managing expectations of constituents. And the political climate has evolved quite a bit over the last 8 years.

J Jason Duff 12:01

Everyone loves every time you make a decision, right?

C Christina Muryn 12:04

Everybody is so happy. Everything's perfect.

J Jason Duff 12:07

Yeah, it's tough out there. It is tough.

C Christina Muryn 12:09

And I think that one of my positions as a leader is to be a realistic voice. In identifying, yep, that is a challenge, or yes, it does suck that, you know, that business closed or that this business had layoffs. But the reality is, is that we continue to evolve and move forward and continue to invest in ourselves so that, again, we are appealing for outside investments and continued investments by our local businesses. And managing expectations and communicating is always challenging. But ultimately, I think that we've got really positive things going on and people recognize that. And hopefully, as people recognize that, they also start to speak up so that the loud voices, those negative voices, are not the only ones being heard.

J Jason Duff 12:53

Tell me about when you ran for office, you became elected, kind of on day one, what it meant to form a team and kind of a coalition around goals that you had and wanted to accomplish.

C Christina Muryn 13:07

Yeah, so my journey was really interesting because I initially was appointed to mayor when Lydia Mihalik, our former mayor, was appointed to be the director of development for the state of Ohio. And so I was very, very fortunate.

J Jason Duff 13:19

Lydia has been a guest on our show, so she's wonderful. She's awesome.

C Christina Muryn 13:22

Yeah, and we've been really fortunate to have her in this new position, and she set me up for success. She had a great team, and so it was easy for me to come in and work with them, to trust and kind of just see how they were operating, obviously listening to them to hear what's working well, what are the challenges, what are you concerned about short and long term? And my goal was just to remind them, I'm here to support you. I need you to educate me, but you're the subject matter expert.

J Jason Duff 13:51

Yeah.

C Christina Muryn 13:51

And so I need you to bring— when you bring me a problem, I also need you to bring me recommendations on how to solve it, right? If we're having an issue at the water treatment plant, I really don't know that much at that point. I know a whole lot more, let me tell you, but I need you guys to be the subject matter experts. And then since then, obviously over the last 8 years, I've really had to evolve our team and replace folks as they move to different positions and making sure that I had folks that thought of things differently than I thought, that challenged me, that also were there for the right reasons, and that are going to work really hard on behalf of the citizens of Findlay. And I am incredibly grateful. We have a fantastic team of people that are there and doing great work. So I'm really proud to have them.

J Jason Duff 14:38

Christina, one thing that I've noticed that Findlay does really well is not only are you being recognized for your growth in recruiting new businesses, but I've noticed that there is a key focus of helping existing businesses be successful.

C Christina Muryn 14:53

Yeah.

J Jason Duff 14:54

Many communities spend that time chasing and finding that next big employer. Findlay seems to excel at helping existing employers grow. Is that something that's that you actually, and the administration and the business alliance focus on?

C Christina Muryn 15:09

100%. Yes, that is a huge focus. And it goes back to a couple things. One, when you're recruiting a new business, it takes extensive amount of energy and you still have a very low probability of winning a project, right? Anybody who's in economic development knows that you can spend years trying to land a project and it would all be for naught. And so we have really focused on making sure that we are supporting our existing businesses so that they are reinvesting, so that they're looking at expansions and Finley's at the top of their list, that they are successful. And so that has been very intentional in the majority. And I think 2 years ago, all of our projects for site selection were all from existing businesses.

E Ethan DeLeon 15:56

Wow.

C Christina Muryn 15:57

And so, you know, that capital investment, the new employees and their success, like I said, it not only helps them and creates more stability, but it also then shows outside businesses that are looking that, hey, if I come to Finley, I'm going to have that success as well, because we all become a part of their team. And that's what I tell people when they're looking at Finley. I say, if you choose us, we commit to you. So I'm here to help and we're all going to wrap around you. And then we try to make it really easy for them to choose Finley.

J Jason Duff 16:27

Are there any other lessons that other communities can learn around supporting their businesses right in their backyard?

C Christina Muryn 16:34

Yeah, I would say building that relationship, reaching out to them. Again, whether it's, I don't care if you're in charge of economic development or not in charge of economic development. If you're the mayor, you're in charge of economic development.

J Jason Duff 16:47

That's right.

C Christina Muryn 16:48

You may not have the title, but that's your responsibility. And so building Relationships, reaching out, and then obviously the processes, right? Making sure that your process for investment is easy. We're really fortunate in Findlay that if somebody looks to do development, if they come in and they have a land and they meet the zoning and they come in with their site plan, we have our site plan review. We get all of our departments around the table and review and provide feedback to them. in advance of it going to that City Planning Commission so that they know and they can provide solutions to adjust or have a discussion with us about, well, no, that doesn't really work and here's why. And then if they need any Planning and Zoning Committee approval, that meeting is on the same day. And so they can come in, they can do all of their business.

J Jason Duff 17:39

Be efficient. One-stop shop.

E Ethan DeLeon 17:40

Yeah.

C Christina Muryn 17:41

Whether they're out of town or local folks, making it really easy. And I would tell you, people all the time reach out and say, oh my gosh, your team was so easy to work with. I called them, we set up a meeting, they took time to explain things to me, and we, we become a part of their team.

J Jason Duff 17:56

That is really refreshing to hear. The, uh, that's rare. Um, so I'm sure you've heard that before, but the other, uh, thing is, is time is money for developers. And so when you're respectful of that, I think they're also then respectful of the city and, and the partners there. I also appreciate when city staff chimes in on something to give the elected officials and the judiciary bodies some context to things.

C Christina Muryn 18:21

Yeah.

J Jason Duff 18:21

Some communities do the exact opposite. They just tee it up with no context. And, you know, that, that can create headwinds and challenges if it's not clear of how has the city analyzed these codes, these rules, the engineering behind it. So I really like your approach. It's very refreshing.

C Christina Muryn 18:39

And I think it goes back to overall, like, the culture of Findlay. We are a yes community rather than a no community. So we say yes, but, or yes, and we need to do this. But ultimately, our first instinct is not to say no. It's to say, how do we make this work?

J Jason Duff 18:56

Let's double-click and say yes to that. Thank you for doing that. And again, I think that for people listening, there's a lot of NIMBYism out there, or not in my backyard. And we talked about this. I think change is, it can be scary, but when you have professional staff really looking at the comprehensive plan for the community, the strategic goals of the community development, there are appropriate places for everything.

C Christina Muryn 19:23

Yeah.

J Jason Duff 19:23

It's just finding the right ways to incorporate that into your city plan.

C Christina Muryn 19:27

Definitely.

J Jason Duff 19:28

The other kind of big theme that I've noticed about Findlay is building a place that you want to be. And you were born and raised in the community. You went to Finley University and graduated from there. A lot of towns lose their young people to the bright lights of the big city. Now that you are a young mayor, you know, really working to listen to different constituents in your community, can you speak to the younger demographics, some of the things that they're telling you and the vision that they see and want for the city of Findlay?

C Christina Muryn 20:03

Definitely. You know, I think like the majority of the country, we have an aging population. And one of the things that Findlay has historically benefited from is this mentality of kids would grow up in Findlay and then go off to college, maybe have a starter job. And then when they were getting ready to start a family, they would move back home to be close to their parents because they realized all the wonderful benefits of being in Findlay. Well, this is just anecdotal. I don't have the data to back this up. So if somebody wants to research it, please send me the data.

J Jason Duff 20:39

Someone will in the YouTube comments.

C Christina Muryn 20:40

But I believe this, like, to my core, is that what we're seeing is because folks are waiting to start to have families later in life, they are not moving back to their families because they are now in their prime earning years while they're starting their family. And so what we're starting to see is not as many legacy families moving back to Findlay, but instead the parents eventually, either later in their career, having a career shift or waiting until retirement and then moving to their children.

J Jason Duff 21:13

Mm-hmm.

C Christina Muryn 21:14

And so that has really made me approach how do we be an attractive community differently? Because it goes back to kind of my earlier statement. The reality used to be is we had that family draw and therefore you just needed to have a good job, good housing, and good schools.

J Jason Duff 21:31

Mm.

C Christina Muryn 21:31

Now we have to say, what is the drawback beyond just those things related to the quality of life amenities? Because young people are looking for that community building outside of work and home, to be able to go to the parks, to hang out with friends. And yeah, we have great restaurants, we have great, you know, activities, but what are the kind of free items that people can do? And unfortunately, Findlay is very flat. We don't have, you know, mountains or lakes or beaches. So how do we make the river the asset? How do we have trail connectivity? How do we make our beautiful parks more utilized more? And so that mentality of making sure that we have those free amenities and that quality of life is something that I'm hearing from young people and that I see just anecdotally when I'm talking to my classmates that all grew up in Finley, when they're looking to move back or why they aren't moving back. I'm like, why are you not moving back? I'm very offended.

J Jason Duff 22:30

Yeah.

C Christina Muryn 22:31

And, you know, it's— they, they are in their prime working in a different place, and that opportunity just hasn't quite presented itself.

E Ethan DeLeon 22:37

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J Jason Duff 22:51

What investments have had the greatest impact on attracting and retaining residents, from your opinion?

C Christina Muryn 22:58

Oh my goodness, it's a little bit of everything. I think housing obviously is a key one. You know, people need a great place to call home. And so we're definitely looking at how we continue to invest in that to both revitalize our historic kind of legacy neighborhoods that maybe not be in great condition. How do we bring new types of housing into the community? Not just traditional single-family residential, but apartments, condos, villas, luxury lofts, whatever it may be. Having those options has been really important.

J Jason Duff 23:30

How important is downtown Findlay to the city's identity?

C Christina Muryn 23:35

Oh my gosh, it is hand in hand. You know, the saying goes that the downtown is a heartbeat to a community, and that is certainly true of downtown Findlay. It is this great juxtaposition of Marathon and business headquarters, and it's the county seat. So we have the courthouse and the municipal building all downtown. But we also have wonderful shops and apartments and homes and historic neighborhoods all around it and the river. And so having it be a thriving downtown has been really, really important to attracting businesses, attracting residents, and attracting visitors. We have seen a huge influx of weekend visitors to the community. We have sports tourism that we're continuing to try to build on. Couple weeks ago we had, this sounds ridiculous, but literally like 120 softball teams.

J Jason Duff 24:28

That's huge. No, we know this past weekend how much that generates an economic activity for the restaurants, grabbing ice cream, staying in the hotels. So that's huge.

C Christina Muryn 24:38

Yeah. So, but that downtown, when people come to a community, you know, I want them to experience all that Findlay has to offer. And we certainly have lots of great businesses throughout the community, but people are drawn to a downtown and having that walkability. a good energy. A couple months ago, we had a group of mayors from the UK that were visiting Ohio and Chicago and Michigan. And the one afternoon they stopped in Findlay for lunch and I met up with them. And I was standing on the street outside of Wilson's because that's where they wanted to get a traditional American lunch.

J Jason Duff 25:10

Tell people if they've not been to Wilson's what is unique about it.

C Christina Muryn 25:13

So much. So they do the ground beef on site. It's the griddle top burgers. We believe it is the impetus of Wendy's, though QP also tries to have that argument. But Finley and I—

J Jason Duff 25:25

It could be either one. They're both amazing.

C Christina Muryn 25:27

Wilson's is clearly correct. No, but we're standing outside.

J Jason Duff 25:31

A little battle with the QP people.

C Christina Muryn 25:32

Yes. And we're like standing outside talking and one of the mayors just goes, wait, is there music playing right now? And I was like, yeah. And she's like, why? And I was like, just for good vibes. And she was like, I love this so much. It was fantastic. She's like, is it a radio station? I'm like, well, not in the traditional sense. It's literally like a curated service and there's no commercials except for downtown Findlay and promoting like the holiday that may be going on. And so it's just like all of those little things that create atmosphere and connection and good memories. I want people to feel like they're walking through a movie. When they're—

J Jason Duff 26:12

Yeah. That Hallmark kind of town.

E Ethan DeLeon 26:14

Yeah.

J Jason Duff 26:14

And I, and I do think Findlay, it's got so much of that character. And when we were in town visiting, I was so impressed with how the flower pots were well planted, the trash cans were being emptied. And I asked the mayor, I'm like, how, how is this getting done so well? And she said, well, we're intentional. We've got a city staff person that he takes a lot of pride in keeping and caring those for those things. So I wanna, compliment you on that. That's really great that there's that commitment and ethic to do that. But let me ask you this question of something that you'd like to see more of, or as you talk with your stakeholders, we'd love to attract more of this, or maybe this type of business or industry. Because when we were walking around, we saw a few development opportunities in downtown Findlay, and I'd like you then to mention after you kind of share some of the things that you're hoping to attract and bring more of, you're organizing a group to meet with developers to share development opportunities in your community, in your region too.

C Christina Muryn 27:17

Yeah, so certainly trying to, again, be intentional. We have some beautiful historic buildings in our downtown that are being used on the first, maybe first and second floor, but their upper floors are still sitting vacant. And it's because, you know, they're expensive. They're expensive, huge old buildings.

J Jason Duff 27:37

Right.

C Christina Muryn 27:37

But they're so beautiful and have so much opportunity. So some of the things that I have ideas around and would love for someone to call me up and help execute are creating similar to your marketplace, you know, that shared space that maybe somebody can't use a full storefront, but a smaller footprint would work out for them. We have a very strong farmers market group that I would love to do an indoor year-round farmers market. Oh, that'd be cool. and be able to have local vendors and craftsmen be able to do, you know, have spaces for that. I would love to just have more retail in our downtown with clothing specifically. And, you know, shoe stores, we used to have a couple shoe stores and, you know, obviously online retail is great amenity, but it also kills a lot of small businesses. So being able to invest in that, we're also working to fill in a couple of gaps where we had a building that burnt down. So we're hoping to see investment in that lot here soon. And then just continuing to kind of move our footprint of downtown farther north to connect it across the river. We're seeing some investment there. We just saw a beautiful historic building reinvested and turned into some offices as well as lofts. But eventually I really want to tie it all the way up into the University of Findlay campus and make that really feel like it's a part of downtown as well.

J Jason Duff 28:56

Love that vision and those steps. When we were in your office, you've been working with professional designers and architects and engineers to vision up some of those new plans. Do you ever run into issue? You know, there are dreamers and there are doers. How do you help take this conceptual idea like this park project and really bring it to life? Because there's a lot of steps to do that.

C Christina Muryn 29:22

Yeah, we've been working on this project for 4+ years now. So it definitely is a heavy lift. And I think it's continuing to tell the story, to not let negativity stop us. You know, it made us pause a couple of times and give more context and information. It's paring it down into achievable, you know, pieces. So like we're doing the South Bank Riverwalk this year. So being able to start on that, we've been working at kind of putting the pieces in place with tax increment financing districts around where the investment is going to be made. It's talking to donors about key ways for them to invest in the project and the surrounding area. And then it's really looking at different grant opportunities and saying, okay, I may not be able to find a grant that just pays for the whole thing, though that would be amazing. It's, hey, there's some funds for, the native prairie aspect. We can get money for the trees along the roadway. We can get improvements for the sound system or the stage. So it's really being intentional about going out and researching and breaking it down and saying, how do we fit all of these puzzle pieces together? And I tell people all the time that I'm a professional puzzler. That is what my job is.

J Jason Duff 30:39

Ooh, I like that.

C Christina Muryn 30:40

And the puzzle though, I always say, imagine a big room of dominoes. It says, say you're in a gymnasium and you have a bunch of dominoes that you're setting up. And I don't know about you guys, but I think it was Reading Rainbow that had all of the beautiful dominoes set up.

J Jason Duff 30:54

Oh yeah.

C Christina Muryn 30:54

And sometimes I know what I want the overall vision to be, what the end product to be, but I have to set up the dominoes in every little area to make it fall the way that I want it to fall. And sometimes that means pulling a domino out or redesigning an area so that ultimately when we start making things go, it goes the way we want it to.

J Jason Duff 31:13

Excellent analogy. And I was a big Reading Rainbow fan, so— I loved Reading Rainbow. Good choice. Good choice. Looking toward the future, what opportunities are you most excited about for Findlay in the next 5 years?

C Christina Muryn 31:25

So certainly getting flood mitigation done.

E Ethan DeLeon 31:28

Yes.

C Christina Muryn 31:29

You know, that has been a top priority in our community for 2 decades. It is this lingering, hairy, ugly thing. So being able to really accomplish that and make the river an asset rather than a liability, that I literally will probably cry at the groundbreaking.

J Jason Duff 31:44

That would be a big one.

C Christina Muryn 31:45

And I like keep telling everybody, like, just don't be surprised.

J Jason Duff 31:47

And for people that know, you know, it's actually underway, right?

C Christina Muryn 31:52

Yes, so we are going to be breaking ground on the final 3 of 5 projects probably in the next 2 months.

J Jason Duff 31:59

And it's a massive, there's also a huge federal contribution to this project, right?

C Christina Muryn 32:03

Yes, so we received \$60 million from the state, \$24 million from the federal government.

J Jason Duff 32:08

Okay.

C Christina Muryn 32:08

Actually \$24 million in a FEMA grant and \$7 million in a RISE grant through Federal Rail Administration. And then we raised \$30 million locally through a sales tax initiative. And then the city has put in probably \$5 million, and we have another \$5 million earmarked. So it is a huge undertaking. But again, that's how we're then moving forward. How do we turn those into large community benefits? So we're gonna have a 700-acre, like, nature preserve. It's a dry basin as part of flood mitigation. And then we're gonna have the downtown park area that will be great. The next thing that I'm really excited about is some of these downtown buildings. I think the energy of getting flood mitigation resolved will really continue to support that reinvestment. And then I think the third is we're just starting to see a lot of really cool potential economic development projects. So I'm hoping in the next year or two, we'll be able to make some really neat announcements about cool new businesses that are gonna diversify our economy, bring in really strong jobs, and fit really well into our community.

J Jason Duff 33:11

As maybe other mayors are listening or other leaders from their community, what challenges do you believe communities must prepare for?

C Christina Muryn 33:20

Must prepare for? I don't think they need to prepare for them. They're probably already experiencing it. But I think one of the things that I see as the largest barrier is a cultural issue right now with just negativity in general. And this a social media where everybody is attacking each other when they disagree. Everybody's calling everybody that they disagree with corrupt. I think it's just such a negative headspace that's not good for our communities. I think it also stifles innovation, it stifles investment, and I'm concerned about that. I think that what communities continue to prepare for is how do we— we all want a lot of the same things, but how do we make sure that we're positioning our communities to have something a little bit unique to make us attractive? We can't all be, you know, Bellefontaine's incredible. You guys have done some really different things. You also have a different population of people that are coming in with Mad River and with the lake. So how do we have a similar retail culture recognizing that our population is different than what's coming in. So I think it's just understanding your community and being willing to, again, pull stakeholders in and work together. And how do you resolve issues behind closed doors so that once you go out, you are all rowing in the same direction?

J Jason Duff 34:51

What does success in Findlay look like in 2035?

C Christina Muryn 34:55

That seems so far away.

J Jason Duff 34:59

And also— You blink.

C Christina Muryn 35:00

It will also probably be here tomorrow because it's hard to believe you know, that I've been in office since 2019. I think Findlay is going to be the same community we are today, just like a polished up version. I think that we have so many, we've had so many opportunities that have just been sitting, waiting for the right moment, that I think that moment is now. And we're going to see some really cool investment, like in the downtown businesses, in our housing, in revitalizing our neighborhoods, in bringing some new economic development. And I think as a community, we're not going to change a ton. It's really just how do we continue to improve upon what we have today and brushing it up a little bit further.

J Jason Duff 35:44

You and I have had a lot of conversations about how lonely sometimes it can be being a leader. And one thing I really admire about you is that you value in connecting with others to learn, to share. to partner. That seems like a cornerstone of your values. Tell me a little bit more about why that's important and how you have networked with other leaders and communities to bring more awareness of Findlay and also opportunity to Findlay.

C Christina Muryn 36:15

Yeah, well, thank you. I really appreciate you recognizing that. And I think it is— I love people. I don't always like them. Sometimes they're kind of rude. But for the most part, I really love people. And I want to represent my community. I want to tell the great things going on in my community to anybody that will listen. But I do love to learn from other people and see people from different backgrounds and in different communities as humans. And I think that I've also really appreciated that mayors from across the country of all, and really internationally, also learn from us, right? Just because we are a smaller Midwestern community, we may not be one of the 3 Cs, or we may not be a huge metropolitan area. I think we're doing a lot of things really well. So how do we continue to tell our story? And I think I really, I have some great friends across the country that are mayors, that it's therapy for me when I'm with them because they do understand the challenges and how lonely it can be as a mayor and how do you cope with those different things. And so it also recharges my battery being able to talk to other people about I'm dealing with this issue. How are you dealing with it? Here's the cool things going on. And being able to talk about that, it just reminds me of the great things that are happening because I can get a little caught up in just moving from problem to problem. So stopping to pause and celebrate what we're achieving on a daily basis is really encouraging.

E Ethan DeLeon 37:45

I agree.

J Jason Duff 37:47

I love that. I think that's a hallmark quality that you have, and I think other leaders can benefit in hearing that. Sometimes it never feels like you do enough. I know I'm kind of projecting because I feel that way sometimes. But then when you're around other people, not only can they remind you of your superpower and your accomplishments and your gift, but they can also push you forward too and challenge you as well. So I love that. Quick lightning round. We're going to have a little lighthearted section here. I know you have many favorite places. But for people that have maybe never been to Findlay, shout out a few favorite must-see experiences when you visit town.

C Christina Muryn 38:27

So I'm really glad that you said I could say multiple because obviously Dietz's is like hallmark. We're using the word hallmark a lot today. Hey, sponsorship opportunity. Actually, there was— well, never mind. I'm not going to get in that. So yeah, Dietz's is my favorite. Japan West. I am a sucker for sushi. Sake. Fantastic. My favorite little wine bar is The Wine Merchant. But we just have so many great places. Honestly, like my favorite thing to do is just like a progressive dinner walking through downtown and enjoy. Honestly, you can do an entire day just kind of exploring downtown and taking a deep breath and having some great food.

J Jason Duff 39:03

Just a shout out to the owner of the Wine Merchant. When I was in there a few weeks ago, I mentioned that I was going to be taking a trip overseas. And not only did he walk me to the part of Italy that I'm going to be visiting, he's like, I'm going to text my friend who lives in this town that will take you out and show you how to have a great time. And that is just Findlay hospitality right there, that someone who met a random person in his shop would take that level of care to do that.

C Christina Muryn 39:32

I love that. And one of the things I tell people all the time is once you know about Findlay, you see all of the Findlay connections because we're like the Kevin Bacon of cities. I love that.

J Jason Duff 39:43

Favorite annual event. Is there any events that stand out?

C Christina Muryn 39:47

Probably Balloon Fest.

J Jason Duff 39:49

Ah, yes.

C Christina Muryn 39:49

I, I love the hot air balloon festival. It's so fun to see them over the city and just all the people coming into town.

J Jason Duff 39:55

Most underrated asset in the city?

C Christina Muryn 39:59

The river.

J Jason Duff 40:00

The river. Yeah. Okay.

C Christina Muryn 40:01

Yeah, I think, but I think we're on the upswing to really turn that around.

J Jason Duff 40:04

One local business everyone should experience?

C Christina Muryn 40:08

Dietsa's, but I will also go with Wilson's. They are nicer to people now, but they used to, like, if you didn't order properly, they'd be like, back of the line. And I loved that about them, honestly.

J Jason Duff 40:19

That's funny. One word that describes Finley's future.

C Christina Muryn 40:24

Bright.

J Jason Duff 40:25

Love that. Signature closing question. I always try to come up with the good ones that kind of encompass the episode. If someone were listening today from a town of 2,000 people, 5,000 people, or even larger, someone who wants to create positive momentum in their community, what part of the Finley formula can they start implementing today?

C Christina Muryn 40:50

Yeah, I would say getting everybody around one table and, and saying, what is the vision and what are 3 measurable steps that we can take in the next 12 months?

J Jason Duff 41:00

I love that. On that note, thank you again for sharing with us today. You should feel, and I, I know, just as someone that recently visited Finley, the momentum, the buzz, the energy, people can feel it. I appreciate you joining us of sharing the story of one of America's most successful communities. The lessons about Findlay isn't just about, you know, happens just because of one company, one mayor, one project. It really is the whole community pulling together and coming together. And thank you so much for being on the show today.

C Christina Muryn 41:32

Thank you for having me. Always great to chat with you, Jason.

E Ethan DeLeon 41:34

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