Matt Wagner:

Welcome to the Main Street Business Inside podcast. I'm your host, Matt Wagner, chief program officer at Main Street America, a nonprofit leading a collaborative movement dedicated to strengthening communities through place-based economic development and community preservation. Each week join me as I travel the country and take a deep dive into the personal journeys of downtown and neighborhood entrepreneurs. The stories that far too often go unnoticed and unheard, whether you're a small business owner who wants to learn from your peers or community leader looking to better support your local business base. Main Street Business Insights is here to provide you with the tools, strategies, and personal stories to help you and all of your Main Street businesses thrive. So subscribe now and tune in every Wednesday to get inspired by the individuals driving our communities forward.

Welcome everyone to episode eight of season two of the Main Street Business Inside podcast. Today's podcast finds me in Emporia Kansas, chatting with Casey Woods, executive director of Emporia Main Street. Having known Casey for a number of years and visiting Emporia many times, I've been wanting to showcase the role of Main Street as really like a social enterprise driving positive change as a central player in the community or the region's small business support system. I would contend that human capital has really become the key differentiator in economic development.

Now, in the old days, things like land costs or even utility rates were the defining metrics. Today we find increasing dialogue around human capital in the form of things like available or particular skillsets in bodies in a local workforce. But given workforce shortages today and likely for decades to come, I meant just look at the population trends, I continue to believe that economic development relies more than ever on quality of place. Simply put, where do people want to be? This is really the intersection of our Main Street support systems that drive quality of place with what is often labeled as high propensity ecosystems that being more regional or even statewide systems set up to support more high-tech or manufacturing based economies.

But to put it simply, if you aren't investing in quality of place initiatives like district development, workforce housing, trails, you simply won't be competitive. I would further contend that for many, rather than doing things like industrial park investment, think of your downtown or neighborhood commercial district as your industrial park with small-scale producers, creative spaces for high-tech industries supported by upper-floor housing, local retail and eateries. And at the same time in a way that maintains authenticity of your community and where locals have opportunities to benefit from its success.

This is what you'll hear more about as we engage Casey in a discussion on how his organization has positioned itself within the broader support system, adding place elements like an amazing downtown incubator and makerspace, becoming the go-to not only for downtown businesses, but central within the regional hub. Hope you enjoyed this special conversation and we'll see you on the other side.

Welcome, Casey Woods to the show. It's so great to have you on. I think this is probably my third or fourth trip to Emporia. And I think I was telling you earlier, this may be the community that I visited the most throughout my Main Street career. Every time I come here something's always changing. There's always this amazing kind of entrepreneurial thinking and spirit happening. I'd love for you to start out maybe just telling us a little bit about yourself, your background and kind of that career journey to Main Street.

Casey Woods:

Well, first we love having you in Emporia, so you come visit whenever you'd like. I got started in Main Street primarily because my family both had businesses, my mother and father had businesses in the area. My dad had a cattle ranch. My mother had a department store. And I split time between the two. And my mother wasn't really a joiner when it came to organizations and she had people that were constantly trying to get her involved with a variety of different leadership positions and she would say, "I won't, but you should talk to my son."

And a lot of those folks at that time, I was in my early 20s said he's too young, whatever. But we had a Main Street director at the time who's now the state coordinator for the Alabama Main Street program. So Mary Worth was the Main Street director, and I had stepped up and taken on a bridal show that the leadership had left about six weeks before the show was supposed to occur. And so my mother said, "You're taking it on." And Mary offered to help, didn't know anything about Main Street at that point, and she asked if I would sit on the board of directors. And I again, still didn't know anything about Main Street, but got involved and was a volunteer for about 10 years. Loved the program, was president at a point in time where Emporia Main Street was honored with a GAMSA and the position came open for the executive director position and I just said, this is something that I really love to do and I love to get back to my community. So I have now been the Main Street director here in Emporia for about 15 years.

Matt Wagner:

Okay, wonderful. I think it's always amazing when you talk to any Main Street director, there doesn't appear to be any one pathway to this work. And I think that's what's so exciting about it is that you can sort of take your interest and use them to shape the Main Street effort. With you, you certainly have this both with your parents but also maybe sort of this internal vibe around entrepreneurial thinking and doing. That's probably why I relate so closely to you. I think we share a lot of that. I think throughout the history of Main Street, external audiences have perhaps viewed Main Street in the program itself is maybe more sort of promotional or kind of like the external view of a downtown or a neighborhood commercial district or even more preservation based initiatives. And I wonder how your background, the way that you think and process entrepreneurially has shaped how you think about Main Street here in Emporia.

Casey Woods:

Well, I think a lot of Main Streets definitely have that party planner vibe. For us, I think we look at the holistic use of our buildings, of our area gap analysis. So what doesn't exist that should exist to push our community forward and how does that actually push our community forward? Can we test it small? Can we grow those different concepts? Can we look at what works and what doesn't and kill the things that don't work and shift more assets into the things that do?

I think in the world of agriculture on a ranch, you were often by yourself, you had to make decisions and you had to create things that hadn't been created before. And in the small business realm on the entrepreneurial side, I was involved with a lot of tech innovation and doing things that you just had to build the plane as you were attempting to fly it, which is kind of what Main Street is.

Matt Wagner:

Perfect.

Casey Woods:

And so I think all of those different experiences allowed me to look at Main Street as a way to not only preserve the buildings but preserve function within the area and create new opportunities and look for the assets that we have in the area and really come up with a strategy for how we can fully utilize those different assets to build a better region.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah. Before there was even this notion of Main Streets as small business or entrepreneurial support systems or ecosystems as they're commonly called, you were already, it seems, leveraging your role is kind of this connection point or even a convener around this work of developing and providing resources for small businesses, not only really within the downtown but the community. Could you talk a little bit about what was that journey like? How did it take shape? Was it just one morning you woke up and say, we should be doing this? What was that journey like?

Casey Woods:

I think it's a lot of listening, and so the businesses and the building owners and community members talk about the things that they need, and as a Main Street director, it's our job to try and figure out how to get them those things in a sustainable fashion. So you had a lot of our entrepreneurs said, we need a startup dollars or expansion dollars. So we worked with Network Kansas and the Kansas Department of Commerce to come up with loan funds and some internal loan funding to make that happen. We had to become really familiar with a lot of economic incentive programs because if you don't even know that they exist, you can't take advantage of them. There were property owners that talked about the inability to invest because they weren't making enough on their particular property. So coming up with some alternative uses for those properties like housing in the upper stories that were typically vacant.

From a community member standpoint, there's the why don't we have a X and go get me the thing. And trying to convert that into a, well, we have a start in our own business class or an e-tech startups class, why don't we work together to create our own version of that thing? And talking about market capacity and having the more detailed discussion. So I think any Main Street director, our first role is to listen and then engage the public in creating solutions for those different problems or spotting opportunities and communicating those opportunities and finding partners to make those opportunities a reality.

Matt Wagner:

Did you feel any sort of... And I want to put this in a way. A lot of programs feel like they operate in a certain sort of box that might be geography based, you're in downtown or you're in a neighborhood district, or maybe problematic. And you talked a little bit about that very nature of capital resources. Did you feel sort of constricted or did you face any barriers or challenges within the community to say, well, that's not main Street's role, that's such and such role? How did you approach that?

Casey Woods:

We just broke it. I think that's what entrepreneurs do. They talk about that disruptive nature of the market. And I think for Main Street and Emporia, we didn't want others to define us and we understood that we had to work as a region. We're highly rural here. So just this past week we met with our counterparts in all the surrounding counties to talk about ways that we could collaborate on larger funding issues. That's not just specific to the downtown, but we think it's important. We have loan programs through Network Kansas that we operate countywide. We'll train entrepreneurs countywide or to the broader region.

It's important to understand that downtowns don't exist in a vacuum and if the region isn't succeeding, your downtown's not going to succeed either. So we have to take an active role in not allowing ourselves to be confined by some sort of arbitrary geographic box. We have to be strategists or strategic implementers of a plan to benefit the region through core redevelopment, through density-based redevelopment, through entrepreneurship, through creation of resources that help our community grow sustainably. And that doesn't necessarily just apply to some sort of map that somebody inherited. We have to think broader than that.

Matt Wagner:

You've also developed, here in this particular space in your office, you've started to create other kinds of, I think really unique business revenue models if you want to characterize them, unlike I think other nonprofits or Main Street programs that have been typically defined, to that point around maybe memberships or sponsorships and city dollars or public dollars. Could you talk a little bit about how you viewed Main Street in kind of a broader form as a social venture?

Casey Woods:

Sure. I think any business, any entrepreneur will tell you they need diverse revenue streams and if they don't have diverse revenue streams, they're putting themselves in danger of market fluctuations. So for us, we understood that city and county support through appropriations is extremely important and we'll pick up some partnership opportunities with our city and county governments, but we also have investors instead of members because they're getting return on their investment. We have a variety of different events that we also use to build businesses within the area. So we're not just putting booth vendors on the street, we're talking to them about creating pop-ups or using this as a test that's a precursor to a brick and mortar location.

We'll also look at what those problems or opportunities work in the area and ways that we organizationally could monetize those. So we heard from entrepreneurs that that startup phase can be just brutal because you're drinking from a fire hose and you don't necessarily have all the support that you need on site. And that allowed us to form our incubator where they get six months of free rent, six months of reduced market rate rent, and six months of time to find a new location and a permanent location rent, but it serves as a revenue source.

And then our fabrication lab, we had all these people with great ideas, but no way to execute those ideas to create a prototype. And there was this gap between that prototype stage and the ability to produce an amount sufficient for a small scale manufacturer to come in and assist. We had businesses that were losing customers because there was no gap filler there. And so we decided that that was something that we were going to delve into, and it's been another profit center that also helps our businesses succeed by creating unique products. The only place in the world you can find that particular product is at that business, so it drives people to them. And also allows our small scale batch manufacturers to diversify their income streams by having new customers step into the space.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah. That's great learning for both Main Street programs of course, but any small business owner, there's a process there from taking an idea or a kernel from something that you heard from someone as an issue or a challenge and then developing a business around it. Could you talk a little bit about within your organization how you approached that? Did you have to sell the board? What was the sort of business planning process like to take that kernel of an idea and transition it into your incubator and your maker space?

Casey Woods:

Yeah. We have to pitch business plans and the board has a great deal of trust in staff, but it's the same thing that we would require for any business coming in to look at funding. So luckily our board, as part of the review process, I think we manage about 3.5 million worth of loans and we'll manage a lot of different performance analysis for different developments. They're used to that process. So if we come in and pitch an idea, they expect it to be a flushed out sort of idea and to start small and scaling. And so we had worked with pop-ups for incubation. They were used to that process. This was going to be something longer term. We could coordinate with other programs that had been through those processes and do that wonderful R&D that Main Street's known for, the rip-off and duplicate, and learn from successes or failures and then apply those to what we're doing here.

FabLab was a little different because what we do there is substantially different, but we're an industrial community and so people understood that there was a gap there and that nobody really knew how to intersect with it. And they trusted our ability to do that and our donors for a larger scale capital campaign trusted in our ability to make that work. One of our local banks is famous for saying, I'm not quite sure everything that you do, but I know that if we just get behind it works out most of the time.

Matt Wagner:

That's a good relationship.

Casey Woods:

It is a good relationship.

Matt Wagner:

Could you talk also, most Main Street directors and even their boards may not come in with all the necessary skillsets or backgrounds in some of these new initiatives. How do you put together the partnerships and how do you build then the group that's going to take these forward? So it's not like it's all in Casey's hands to do?

Casey Woods:

Well, that's actually a great problem to have because if you have people that aren't experienced with these different things you know that you've got a focus group built in to allow you to explain what you do to the community. I think some people think you can't do a FabLab and if you're not an engineer. Well, I'm not an engineer, but there's a role to play there and we can create a team that has different specialties to come in to make the thing happen. I think having diverse voices on your board of directors from youth and demographics, their income ranges, what type of experience they have in the job market is critical to make sure that what you're doing touches a broad portion of the community. Not everything that you do is going to impact everyone equally, but if you have those voices around the room and you've created an environment where they can speak up and feel like they can be heard, then you have a better end product.

Matt Wagner:

I think there's always a little bit of maybe tepidness around, am I going to step on anyone's toes? Is that someone else's responsibility or role? If I do this, does it make them feel like they're not carrying what should, their natural role as an agency or another organization? How did you approach that given, oh, that Main street, I thought you were just downtown?

Casey Woods:

Well, I think there are some organizations that are built on history, and I think main streets are a built on impacts. And so we have to concentrate on what those impacts are and we love it when people want to partner with us to get things done, but if something's not being done and it's really critical to the community that those things are accomplished, we've got to step into that space. We have that conversation internally with staff and the board all the time, those investor dollars are a small businesses weekend out with family, they're a vacation for someone. The investment dollars from the community, those are things that they can invest in a variety of different ways.

We have to show impacts, and I think if we get overly worried that whose role is for what as opposed to worrying about the impacts, then we become stagnant as a community. And what we found is people root for winners. So if you get things done, people will typically come around and our partnerships with Flint Hills Technical College or Emporia State University or some of the local banks or some of the area larger businesses just wouldn't occur if we were focused on staying in our box as opposed to getting things done.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah. Could you talk a little bit about how your incubator, your maker space, your financial capital programs, again, all the things that we typically think about as a support system or an ecosystem for small businesses, how do you frame that within Main Street four-point approach? How does that come together for you?

Casey Woods:

Yeah, a lot of those are in the economic vitality or what we call business enhancement. Really what we're trying to do is identify barriers to entry and barriers to sustainability. So even those existing businesses that are not new to the market but they need to evolve, they need resources too. And developing their own products, whether those are physical products or working with Emporia State University to take their knowledge and create a product out of it is important to diversify income streams.

We know that we've got to have more than pretty buildings, they have to be full. So that's a struggle for everyone. And you deal with property owners that don't want to rent or sell for some reason. I think every community has that. We have that too. But when you have people that want to engage the market, we have to have quality businesses that are ready to go into those different spaces that have those diverse revenue streams that can make it long-term, and that's an important thing to celebrate. And then it's also important to talk about all those different things that went into that win so hopefully more people will emulate that process and you can repeat it throughout your downtown and create a space that people want to travel to.

Matt Wagner:

You and I were talking earlier as I was touring the FabLab around this intersectionality between what we do on Main Street and establishing a community that's attractive, where people want to be, where small businesses can be successful, and what seems to often occur is kind of a separate movement, if you want to call it that, around then big business, high-tech kind of support systems. Where do you see those two things coming together in your work?

Casey Woods:

Well, we think that high-tech businesses downtown are critically important, and I think if you look at the research, either through Main Street or we've worked with the Center on Rural Innovation, some other groups, they talk about the need for disposable income in your community, which requires some of those different high-tech jobs.

There's the infrastructure element, so whether we're working with ValueNet, that's a private company that built out our own high-speed internet backbone, or we're working with Emporia State University on their REN network, we need to make sure that there's a robust infrastructure that allows those businesses to exist. I think from our vantage point, it's part of that diversifying the local economy, but there's a pride element that's part of that that we have to sell to the general public that some people, some communities, I'm sure we're not the only one, tend to wrap their self-worth up in the brand names that are part of their community, and we try and invert that process and say that things that make you proud as a community are also the things that make you unique. Businesses are part of that. The festivals are part of that, the buildings are part of that.

And you should derive your self-worth as a community by the things that you're able to support inside your town that are ones of one, and you're the only place in the world that you can get an X. A sweet Granada chocolate, a Radius beer, an Imaginarium session with Kids STEM.Those are the things that people will take with them wherever they go in their communities because those are the memories that you create, the unique opportunities, the unique business interactions, and we have to sell that to the general public on a consistent basis.

Matt Wagner:

One of the aspects that you mentioned early on in the conversation is that over time within Main Street's 40 plus year history, there had been a period of time I think where we were really focused on marketing and promotions. I think that pendulum is starting to equalize out a lot more in terms of economic vitality or whatever name the local community utilizes. How do you remain comprehensive in your work? Because a lot of this is so cool where you could just dive deeper into your work in the FabLab and the incubator and all the capital sort of spaces that you're in. How do you maintain that comprehensiveness?

Casey Woods:

Well, that's where the four-point approach is really important. I think it requires us to look at the same problem through different lenses. If we have the big event, how do we convert that into foot traffic for our businesses? How do we convert that into new businesses? How does that influence design. And our business enhancement activities or economic construction activities with the FabLab is just the opposite of that, where we've got something that we're building, how do we convert that into a makerspace summit that brings people from throughout the state into the downtown area?

The lensing is really important because there are a lot of organizations that are stuck in that industrial mentality where we only do the one thing and we don't think about how that one thing impacts all the other things. But if we use that more organic mentality, I call it the iPhone mentality, where you have one tool that does several different things, you can have a broader, more sustainable impact. I think that's why I love the Main Street process. We could deep dive into one thing, but we would be doing the community a disservice. If we broaden our perspective and take the time to incorporate some of those other perspectives, then we have a better end product that elevates our community over time.

Matt Wagner:

Emporia Main Street is really established this amazing foundation of support for small businesses. And I wonder, as you look ahead, what are your aspirations for the program? Where do you see this effort going?

Casey Woods:

Well, I think the more regional focus is going to be important when we work with our counterparts in surrounding counties and surrounding communities. We need to elevate the entire area. I think rural communities in particular have a tendency to look backwards in time and try and recreate the past as opposed to focusing on some of those different future elements and intersecting with them. I think that's what excites me about Main Street where we get to look at things like AI without trepidation, more of a how do we take those tools and create business suites in our downtown that can help people utilize AI to create wholly new products or services, or how do we take some of these different FabLab elements and create artist co-ops where they have the tech tools to build their own art and their own products in the downtown? Or how do we take what used to be large processing labs for food and create the ability to work with our restaurants and bottle their sauces and create new revenue streams for them?

I think the ability to work with all different types of entrepreneurs and really brand the downtown as the place for entrepreneurship. If you're going to be an entrepreneur, you want to be around other entrepreneurs and this is the place to get that done. And it's also the place to live and live life with different events and activities and unique businesses and interactions that you don't get in kind of a sterile sort of suburban strip mall-ish sort of vibe. Those are all things that excite me about the future of Main Street.

Matt Wagner:

That is wonderful. Could you leave us with a little advice to your colleagues in the Main Street world, other directors out there in terms of how you've approached your work and any advice you give to them?

Casey Woods:

Well, I'd say that this is a difficult job and we need to be clear about that. And one of my best pieces of advice I got when I was onboarding as a Main Street director, I was told you can be popular or productive, but you can't be both. So, pick one. And choosing that productivity route is important, but I'd also say that it's really important to get addicted to wins. And if you can find ways to solve problems sustainably and to create things that actually are catalysts that create future growth, and you can internalize that not always being addicted to public sentiment in the social media age because things will ebb and flow, but trying to impress yourself and your board and the local citizens and know that you're making a difference by the program and scope of work that you're accomplishing, that's really important for directors. Get addicted to wins and go find what that means for your community and make those wins happen.

Matt Wagner:

Wonderful. Casey, thanks so much for joining the podcast, but also for your leadership, not only here in Emporia, but across the Main Street network. We're big fans and we'll continue to follow right along, and we'll also put some things in the show notes so people can see all the great work and all the visuals here in Emporia.

Casey Woods:

Well, thanks for visiting. Come back anytime.

Matt Wagner:

So there you have it. I hope you enjoyed the conversation with Casey Woods, the executive director of Emporia Main Street. There's a certain energy you feel when you're talking with Casey about their work that truly demonstrates both the power of Main Street approach to create positive community change, but the flexibility of the approach to tailor it to quality of place. Main Street has never been a formula like simply do these 10 things and you'll be successful. Communities really leverage the approach and implement based on their unique circumstances. Some driving cultural heritage like Allapattah in Miami, Florida, or leveraging the approach as a social venture like in Skowhegan, Maine that recently opened this amazing outdoor equipment library so that equipment costs weren't a barrier to participate in all the outdoor recreation opportunities within their community.

The story of Emporia and Casey's work, there is really a microcosm of what you see each and every day of the more than 1200 Main Street programs out there making a difference in not only the physical attributes of their district, but really it's people. I think in many ways that's the misnomer about Main Street, it's actually the human element and their stories that provide such a rich tapestry of experiences and further define our programs. And on that point, I want to thank Casey for sharing his insight and philosophy for directing a Main Street effort, but also the things that you don't see. Like the owner of Radius Brewing Company in downtown, taking the time and a busy lunch period to simply write down the recipe for me of their broccoli salad that was off the charts delicious. You see, it is the people that make the difference.

As always, if you're a business owner, and likewise to my place professional colleagues out there, I hope this episode has provided plenty of new insights, solutions, and inspiration. And as consumers, please continue to support your local small businesses and of course tell their stories. They're so important to our local and national economies. And most importantly, they promote and provide quality of living to the places we all call home.

Now, that's going to do it for this week's episode, but remember to check out our growing list of films and video recordings of the podcast on our Main Street America YouTube channel. Thanks for listening. Please rate and review us, and as always, be sure to subscribe and tell your friends and family and neighbors and colleagues so you can all catch the next episode when I'm going to be in the Shoalwater Bay Tribal community in Washington State, chatting with Jamie Courtney, CEO of the Shoalwater Seafood Company, an organic oyster farm and tribal enterprise will be focusing in on all the aspects of the business, including the important intersections of the business with tribal history and values, climate impacts, and the recent US Department of Transportation Thrive Initiative, which Main Street America is leading nationally. Don't miss it. We'll see you then and thanks for all the support.