Madelyn Plummer

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- Jason Ilstrup

Welcome to the Downtown Down-Low podcast where we hear from our members every month and learn something new about downtown Madison. All right let's get into it.

- Jason Ilstrup

Welcome to the downtown down low. My name is Jason Ilstrup and I'm proud to be your host today. We have Tiffany Kenney, the executive director of Madison's Central Business Improvement District. That is a mouthful. Tiffany, how are you?

- Tiffany Kenney

I'm good. Thanks for having me.

- Jason Ilstrup

Well, I want to tell all of you in our huge listening audience, Tiffany and I are good friends, we're in this downtown thing together; we share office space. I think we're good friends.

- Tiffany Kenney

Oh yeah, we're good friends. We're in this together.

- Jason Ilstrup

Good. That was for me a form of self-validation. But thank you for doing that. How long have you been a director of the Business Improvement District?

- Tiffany Kenney

I'm going-- I'm finishing-- my third year, so we're entering my fourth.

- Jason Ilstrup

A veteran compared to my measly almost two years here.

- Tiffany Kenney

Time has flown by, and we've done so much.

- Jason Ilstrup

So, I think a lot of people hear the word "bid" in Business Improvement District, but I think many people in this city, since you guys are the only… people don't fully understand. What exactly is the Business Improvement District?

- Tiffany Kenney

So, a Business Improvement District is geographically defined. So, that means there’s sort of a boundary to the area and it's an assessment district that the property owners-- it's a self-assessment district. So, the property owners make the determination that they want to put more money and invest more time and more resources into a specific area. And so, we're lucky that that's downtown Madison.

- Jason Ilstrup

What is the footprint of the Madison Business Improvement District?

- Tiffany Kenney

So, our Business Improvement District is State Street, the Capital Square. King Street and the 100 blocks off of all of that area. So, it's a pretty small area, but it's the heart of the city.

- Jason Ilstrup

How many total storefronts does that make up, roughly?

- Tiffany Kenney

So right now, there just about three hundred and seventy businesses that are in the business improvement district. Retail restaurants, 190- ish.

- Jason Ilstrup

Oh wow. Well, so in all sorts of services and restaurants.

- Tiffany Kenney

Absolutely. We cover everything from the retail shops, to the, you know the yoga studios, the bikes places, the restaurants, everything.

- Jason Ilstrup

So DMI, the group that I work for, is gonna be wondering, “Why is he asking this question?" I know the answer, but I'm asking it for the podcast. What's the difference between DMI and the BID? Maybe I don't know the answer actually. I'm glad you could answer it.

- Tiffany Kenney

The common piece is that we have business property owners and just general public members who care about downtown. That's where you and I have the overlap, where DMI and the Business Improvement District overlap. The difference is probably kind of turfy, geographical. You know our membership is really, (and we call them our constituents,) they are really the downtown core, the State Street/Capital area. And I think DMI is more membership based. People get to select if they want to join and they pay membership dues and they can kind of come from all over Madison, or really anyone who cares about downtown Madison.

- Jason Ilstrup

So, what is the big "do", and what are you charged to do? So, you're a quasi-governmental organization, right? So, what's your charge?

- Tiffany Kenney

Yeah, we have a lot of different areas of work, but we can kind of put them into big buckets. One is to create a welcoming environment and so we do things like, we have an ambassador program. The people who work in the downtown Visitor Center are our staff. We do things like planter programs to add flowers and variety and decorations to the downtown area. That's all of our welcoming environment work. We try to do things that are programs special events for downtown. So, we're proud of the Madison Night Market which is one of the events that we've produced. And I think we're going to talk a little bit about our holiday program Shine on Madison. So, we do programming, we then also do outreach to other businesses to make sure they know what's happening downtown. And when it matters, when we have to make sure that they're heard, we go on the flip side and we make sure everyone knows what's happening downtown with business owners, property owners and what's happening in their world.

- Jason Ilstrup

So, something like The Night Market, which, I mean if you haven't been to the Night Market, do yourself a favor next summer, right? It spreads May, June, not July, August and September. Thanks to Maxwell Street Days in July. Check it out. It's the second Thursday of the month, from 5 to 10?

- Tiffany Kenney

5 to 10 is about the hours, yeah.

- Jason Ilstrup

Just in nine months because you're going to listening to this in November. Check it out. Why is that such an important event for downtown?

- Tiffany Kenney

Well, the idea actually was one that came out of some research we did in partnership with the city of Madison. We were really trying to understand the retail environment and what's happening and how it's changing in all of the country, not just Madison Wisconsin. And one of the recommendations came out was, "how do you showcase, how do you develop and how do you grow, new businesses?" And so, the night market has many goals, but one of them is to highlight the new, the up and coming, who can be a future retailer in downtown and at the same time we're then bringing seven to ten thousand people downtown to see our existing retailers, to spend time at our regular restaurants. It doesn't have to be all about the new stuff, it's just reminding everyone what a cool downtown we have. And so, we've combined those two efforts-- showcase the new and celebrate the old-- and we've put together the Night Market.

- Jason Ilstrup

So, you almost see it as being a kind of like a business incubator potentially for places that could go into bricks and mortar locations on State Street?

- Tiffany Kenney

We sure hope so. We also have seen partnerships. People who make products for some of our retailers downtown. So that's kind of an interesting flip-side of it. We've seen a few of our retailers come shopping at the Night Market for future inventory in their stores and that's a really neat way to think about how we're developing the artisan, the crafts people in Madison Wisconsin.

- Jason Ilstrup

That's really cool because many people listening to this know, downtowns and really all over America, have struggled with keeping retail and retail storefronts. There's been an assault for a series of reasons whether that's the Amazon-ification (that is it probably not even a word that I just stumbled on), the Amazon-ification. The creation of more supply and more store fronts, so things like the Night Market, can help head that off and create a really good space for either to incubate or just to bring more people down with the existing store.

- Tiffany Kenney

And maybe somebody sees that one open storefront thinks, " I want to open my shop in that space." So, you know our open storefront rate is pretty low. We're lucky that in Madison, it still hovers in that six to seven percent, but we want to fill it up. And so, if there's somebody who's a Night Market vendor who is starting to think, " Oh I can really grow into a full retail shop", we'd love to snag him and move him in right away.

- Jason Ilstrup

Well, I think it's, I mean, you still have some incredible staples particularly down State Street where it's Little Luxuries or Soap Opera and all these ---August ---new stores that are coming. You really have this great vibrancy Why do you think it still is vibrant?

- Tiffany Kenney

Well I think we're really lucky again we've got a beautiful downtown. It's walkable, it's friendly, and everything is really really close by. And so, I think if you're coming downtown for one thing why not do the two other things? You're gonna grab dinner, why wouldn't you stop by the Soap Opera, and then also stop into Jasmine and you're all set for the weekend. You've got everything you need sort of in a quick little stop. So, I think a lot of it is about how beautiful and how close together we have this nice downtown.

- Jason Ilstrup

How important do you think the university is in the student. Forty thousand, forty-five thousand students at the end of State Street?

- Tiffany Kenney

Oh, it's vital to the success of State Street. I think what's really fascinating is to watch the different ends of State Street. The top of State Street is arts, culture, government. The lower end is students, food, game day, the Union. And I think, you know there's this great little place in the middle, which is where we host the Night Market ---State Street ---that connects those two areas.

- Jason Ilstrup

How do you find success in the Night Market? I mean, what are your measures of success? How do you say this was a really great event to have?

- Tiffany Kenney

Well I think there's a couple, you know, there's some people who are numbers people. We’re able to use the pedestrian counters that are installed in downtown Madison-- there's 12 of them. And so, we're able to actually use those pedestrian counters to track people who walk by and walk through. But I think it's also important, as we were talking about earlier, to talk about economic success. So, we have a business who's got a brick and mortar space downtown Madison, but they join us for the Night Market. They pop out, they bring a tent. They haul all their stuff over and I want to make sure that that's valuable for them. And when they tell us that that's the busiest night of their month because they have a chance to be exposed to five to seven thousand businesses and that they make, you know, two thousand dollars that night instead of their regular, you know, 200, 300 dollars a night we know we're having some success there too, and we're helping them grow their business but also stay downtown which is important for us.

- Jason Ilstrup

Taking a step back. Really, that sounds like it’s very important, I mean how important are events for the vibrancy of the stores and the restaurants downtown?

- Tiffany Kenney

Yeah that's an interesting part of this work. So, I came on, like we mentioned, almost three years ago or more than three years ago. And it was because I have a background in event work, and it was people asking for more events. And then we did a study that showed us that that is actually truly correlated to the success of our businesses. Seventy percent of purchases made downtown were made because someone came downtown for another reason first. So, they came downtown to go to dinner, they came downtown for a show and then they made a purchase. And so, we need those events. We think they're vital and we need events that are good for our businesses-- so they need to be at the times our businesses are open or vice versa, businesses need to be open when the events are happening-- and we need to have events that draw people in from all over. So, we really can showcase this downtown.

- Jason Ilstrup

Now, events are huge for you guys. So huge that you put on a ton of your own events. One hundred and something you put on this summer alone?

- Tiffany Kenney

Yeah. In partnership with the city of Madison we've got a program that runs through the summer. It's called Summer in your City. And we try to use the public spaces in downtown. There's some at the top of State Street, there's some Lisa Link Peace Park, there's some closer to the student campus, and we program them with arts and crafts and music. We have every Tuesday night a concert, every Thursday at lunch. So yeah, you're right, it was about 100-some. And again, that's just creating a welcome, vibrant environment. As we move into the fall. We have events that are more directly tied in to shopping and supporting our downtown retailers. Things like a Wine Walk which has been really a lot of fun for us to plan.

- Jason Ilstrup

Our producer Madelyn loves the Wine Walk, right Madelyn?

- Tiffany Kenney

There have been three of those very successful Wine Walks so far. And the minute we put those tickets, actually I just put the tickets on sale for the Wine Walk about a week ago, and we're about half sold out because that is an event that people--- well they love wine, we know that. And then they love shopping in downtown Madison.

- Jason Ilstrup

Now I would assume the holidays are also important. How important are the holidays for the retailers and the restaurants?

- Tiffany Kenney

You know, for many of these downtown retail shops this is the most important time of the year. You know they will make it through the summer, they'll make it through fall, and they hope to make some profits in that fourth quarter. And so, we really want to drive business to them, and we have a lot of competition especially as you think about things like Black Friday. Right now, Cyber Monday I think is what they're calling it. So, we've created a couple of different things for 13 years now we've done the holiday open house. So downtown Madison has a holiday open house. It's Black Friday, Small Business Saturday and whatever you want to call Sunday. But it's right after Thanksgiving. We have a holiday trolley. We have lots of activities, shopping gift bags for everybody, and really just a cohesive effort to try to get everyone to think about shopping downtown for their holidays and their seasonal shopping.

- Jason Ilstrup

Now, don't you have some major event at 6:08p.m.? By the way I love that you do it at 6:08p.m., and yet still half the people you and I talked to have no clue why it's... I'm not going to give up the answer right now but just think about it. So, what happens at 6:08p.m. on a Saturday?

- Tiffany Kenney

So, what we are planning is, we were briefly speaking about the Madison Night Market and we have such success with the Madison Night Market in terms of a shopping event that I think the community would ask us if we could do it every single month-- and we cannot. Our staff of three people, I think we're like actually two plus two halves--so I think it's three total. Our staff of three people just couldn't make that happen. But what we DO do is put together a holiday version. So, on November 16th we're doing the winter Madison Night Market. And at 6:08 p.m. as part of a special activity there, we are having a holiday lighting celebration. All of the lights in downtown Madison, our Christmas decorations, our seasonal decorations, our community planters. We're gonna turn them on and that's where we get to Jason's favorite time, 6:08 p.m. So, we're going to do that in one grand gesture. Santa will be there.

- Jason Ilstrup

What, really?

- Tiffany Kenney

The Santa is coming. He's on the list. We're working on some reindeer. Rudolph's not sure if he wants to come but we'll have the celebration at 6:08. Everybody in downtown Madison is encouraged to turn on their seasonal decorations and join us. It's a pretty fun time at the top of State Street.

- Jason Ilstrup

I love it All right now, got just a couple of serious questions. So, quality of life is very important. You talked about how having this attractive place makes people want to come downtown. One of the projects that I wanted to highlight was this Downtown Doors project. What you guys do to bring public art to downtown. Tell me about this amazing project, Downtown Doors.

- Tiffany Kenney

So, Downtown Doors was again a project that, you know we've got peers-- you and I-- the International Downtown Association and we get lots of good ideas and thoughts and when we went to a conference recently, we thought, Hey this is kind of a neat idea. How can we showcase more of our art and how can we take some of these places in downtown Madison that are just a little drab?" So, we did that. We've successfully put out 24 pieces of art. They are all over in that downtown core that I described earlier, and they're in places that are a little bit off the beaten path. They're not usually just on State Street, they're maybe like one step off or stand on State Street and around it's behind you. And we did that on purpose because we are trying to create an area where everyone feels safe and comfortable and walks around in downtown. And so, it's a little bit like a scavenger hunt. You can get your map and you can go find all 24 doors. And it also has helped create spaces that are less "back door" a little bit more attractive.

- Jason Ilstrup

I like that good one good one. Yeah, I like that. So, I'm hearing that there might be even more doors coming in 2020?

- Tiffany Kenney

Oh, I hope so it sounds like we're on a path to maybe do another 15 to 20.

- Jason Ilstrup

Awesome.

- Tiffany Kenney

It could be great.

- Jason Ilstrup

Yeah. So, looks like you guys have had a lot of success with the Business Improvement District and you're the only one in Madison, whereas our friends in Milwaukee have almost 40 BIDs. Do you see BIDs as a good, viable tool for the rest of the city and other areas like Monroe Street or Cap East?

- Tiffany Kenney

Absolutely, I actually would encourage them, and I've been asked a couple of different times by businesses in those areas, Willy Street, Monroe Street, East Washington. You know it depends. The property owners have to want to do it. They have to kind of come up with the different goals or objectives. Our goals tend to feel a little bit more like marketing and promotion not every BID does that. But I would encourage bids as a tool for sort of the geography. You know we really have this unique opportunity to talk about and to promote our downtown because we have this Business Improvement District. I could see Monroe Street jumping right on board and having their own little Monroe Street Business Association or Business Improvement District, whichever.

- Jason Ilstrup

So how important really is it that people come shop, and shop locally, come downtown to shop. I mean it really does make a difference for these local retailers doesn't it?

- Tiffany Kenney

It absolutely does. You know these local retailers... it's interesting because not every product inside the store is a local product and I think that sometimes gets a little bit muddled. But we have as we have local retailers who are curating the best of the best for you. So, if you want some of the best clothes in the country Jasmine has them. If you want some of the most unique products for gift giving so does Little Luxuries and Soap Opera spends so much time researching to have the best products available for you. So, I think it's a quality selection. There's quite a variety of selection and most importantly that money is then staying locally with our store owners who are paying their taxes who are growing the downtown economy.

- Jason Ilstrup

And you can make sure you have wonderful Himalayan salt shaving cream that I have-- I can smell it right now.

- Tiffany Kenney

We can all smell.

- Jason Ilstrup

Yes, there's always a good podcast thing to do is to smell. Delicious. All right Tiffany, are you ready for the Fast and Furious Five? She's looking down at her page. There is nothing on your page about this Fast and Furious. OK. I ask five rapid fire questions and you just say whatever is on the top of your mind are you ready?

- Tiffany Kenney

Yeah.

- Jason Ilstrup

What's your favorite thing about downtown?

- Tiffany Kenney

Rooftop at Fresco, the restaurant.

- Jason Ilstrup

Good answer. Favorite type of food.

- Tiffany Kenney

I'm a pizza girl.

- Jason Ilstrup

Favorite pizza downtown? You're gonna get yourself in trouble. Don't answer that.

- Tiffany Kenney

I can't.

- Jason Ilstrup

What's your favorite season

- Tiffany Kenney

Fall

- Jason Ilstrup

Outdoor music festivals or an indoor concert?

- Tiffany Kenney

Outdoor festival.

- Jason Ilstrup

Do you like the Madison Radicals or Forward Madison?

- Tiffany Kenney

Forward Madison

- Jason Ilstrup

Right, there you go. Tiffany you survived the guy with the Fast and Furious Five, brought to you by Madison's Business Improvement District. Not really. But you could pay for that advertising if you want.

- Tiffany Kenney

All right.

- Jason Ilstrup

Okay good. I think we just signed a deal. Tiffany I can't thank you enough for, one being a great partner with DMI for everything downtown. It's truly been an awesome couple of years downtown for me and thank you for being a huge part of that. You're a wonderful mentor and ally and I want to make sure to say that. So, Tiffany Kenney has been here today, the executive director of Madison Central Improvement District. Thank you very much Tiffany.

- Tiffany Kenney

Thank you.

Thanks for listening. Be sure to tune in next month to learn something new about downtown.