

Agency for Change Podcast: Jason Ball, President, Lincoln Chamber of Commerce

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Jason Ball

Make a difference, every day.

Announcer:

Welcome to Agency for Change, a podcast from KidGlov that brings you the stories of changemakers who are actively working to improve our communities. In every episode, we'll meet with people who are making a lasting impact in the places we call home.

Lyn Wineman:

Nearly every major city has one, a group of business owners dedicated to improving the community, connecting with other businesses and making the city a better place to live, work and play. I'm talking of course about the Chamber of Commerce. And today I'm speaking with the president of the Lincoln Chamber, a man who accepted the role at the end of January, but is already doing great things to make our city a little bit better every day. Hey everyone. This is Lyn Wineman, president and chief strategist at KidGlov. Welcome to another episode of the Agency for Change podcast. Today's guest is Jason Ball, president of the Lincoln, Nebraska Chamber of Commerce, which as Lincoln's lead business organization, works to bring voices together, grow the city and help move it forward. Jason, welcome to the podcast.

Jason Ball:

Thanks so much, Lyn. I'm thrilled to be here today.

Lyn Wineman:

It is so great to have you back in Lincoln, Nebraska, and Jason, can you help our listeners understand the role of the Chamber of Commerce by explaining what it does, how it helps the community? We've all heard of Chambers of Commerce, but give us a bit more.

Jason Ball:

Yeah, so the easiest way I can put it is we are the primary driver for economic vitality in all of Lincoln, Nebraska, and our MSA and in this county. And so Jason, what does economic vitality means? That means that Lincoln can be a great place to start a new business if you're an entrepreneur, if you're an existing business to grow that business, to access more market shares and compete more competitively in your market, locate a business here, or bring new entertainment industry to Lincoln so that we're bringing more visitors into the community that are buying things and participating in things here. When you think of an economically vibrant place, it's our responsibility to be driving that conversation, to make Lincoln a place where that can happen. And the other part of that is at the end of the day, we are a group of businesses that decided to get together ages ago, because they knew they could accomplish

more together than they could separately. And they understood that having a growing economy is going to be good for their businesses down the road. Those are the two ways I explain it.

Lyn Wineman:

I love that. Jason, I'm going to tell you, thank you. Being an entrepreneur and a business owner and a person who's lived a long happy life in Lincoln, Nebraska, I'm going to thank you for all of that because I feel that vitality. And what I love is when you bring people to Lincoln who have never been there before, often, their reaction is "wow," it's "wow." And some great things happening in Lincoln, Nebraska. And so this next question might create a little controversy, but I feel like I have to ask as someone who's familiar with so many businesses in Lincoln, do you have any favorite spots for food or drink or entertainment that you want to highlight?

Jason Ball:

Yes, I do. But Lyn, as you are well aware, I wear everybody's hat in town.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah. 100%.

Jason Ball:

So I can tell you, if you are an ice cream store in Lincoln, Nebraska, I have been inside and sampled your products. Coffee here is amazing. Local beer has changed in the past 10 years since I've-

Lyn Wineman:

It really has. It really has.

Jason Ball:

No, I do it all. I think my answer will be very safe and Chambery in saying that Lincoln is an amazing community when it comes to food. And I will tell you having lived well, most recently in the Austin Metro area, when we moved down there, I thought, oh, this is going to be great. There's going to be great food options. And there are, but I will tell you Lincoln outperforms the Austin Metro in my estimation in many, many ways, in many food genres. So we out kick our coverage. I think we do great there.

Lyn Wineman:

I love that. That is a perfect and very Chambery answer right there. So, you mentioned Austin, you've spent some time in many growing metropolitan areas. From your perspective, how is Lincoln and the issues it faces similar and different from some of those cities?

Jason Ball:

So, you know what, I'll start with the differences, if I can. And I will say one of the big differences that really plays to our advantage is the way we approach economic vitality building in Lincoln, is we're organized better. We have the CVBR Convention and Visitors Bureau, which is the arm of the organization that brings visitors into the community, housed along with the chamber and what's called the Lincoln Partnership for Economic Development. And it is the public private partnership entity that is responsible for the entrepreneurship and new business recruitment and local business assistance. And yes, we do a whole lot of local business assistance, all housed within the Chamber. So all those three

core business-focused entities all answer to not exactly the same board, but some similar entities. They're all tied together through the Chamber. None of them could really operate independently in any meaningful way.

Jason Ball:

And that's good because you want those efforts coordinated. And so, one of our biggest differences is just how organized we are here. When it comes to maybe some similarities, it's the workforce pitch. And I know nobody listening to this right now, if you're in Lincoln really wants to hear me say that, look, workforce is tough, but it's the same everywhere else. But, that really is the honest truth. Doesn't make whoever's listening to this saying, "Gosh, darn it, do something about this workforce issue," doesn't make their challenges any less painful to address. But every large major metro you go into, definitely in the Austin Metro, the first thing every employer's going to tell you is they're having trouble holding onto their people or getting the new people. And so it doesn't matter how fast you're growing. It's the pace of the national economy and certainly the pace of the growth of Lincoln's economy is going faster than what our population base can keep up with. And we can have a more detailed workforce conversation later if you want, but that's probably the biggest-

Lyn Wineman:

That could be a whole episode all by itself. Right. And I'm sure you're just talking about it every day. One thing I've even noticed, Jason, related to workforce now that remote work is so popular, my employees are being recruited by people from Austin and Denver and Kansas City coming in. The secrets out that Lincoln produces a great workforce and people are coming in and stealing.

Jason Ball:

Yeah. The economics of workforce have really changed. And by that, I mean these cheap and easy tools like Zoom and Teams that we're all using with some regularity, they're powerful, they do add value for business, but for decades and decades, one of our competitive advantages in Nebraska and Lincoln, it was just the fact that labor and workforce and the cost of living for that labor and workforce is just lower than in other areas like in California. And so now speed up time, if I'm a California company today, and I can get the quality of work in business services, marketing, creative software design, certainly industries like that, if I'm a California company, I can try to find somebody who lives in Lincoln has a job in Lincoln doing that exact same work.

Jason Ball:

I can pay them maybe 70% of what that employee would cost me. And if they were living in California, but that 70% of a California wage might be actually double what they're making in Nebraska. And so we're going to see some approaches towards, I think wage parody nationally over a long period of time specifically because of these tools and that's going to change how economic development and economic vitality building work in the future.

Lyn Wineman:

It's a little mind boggling. Actually, we even benefit. And I know many other companies in Lincoln benefit from that as well, because we can go contract with clients in other states. And our cost to them is less expensive because our cost of doing business in Nebraska is less expensive. So it's actually a competitive advantage for us. So I'm curious about something. I always like to know, how do people get to where

they are? And I'm curious, what ignited your passion for being involved in the community from something like the Chamber? Is this something you always envisioned for yourself?

Jason Ball:

No, no. I don't think I've ever met anybody certainly in economic development work, which is how I got my start in the chamber industry. And, certainly in the chamber industry in general, no one gets into this on purpose. No one goes to college saying, "I'm going to be an economic developer." No one comes out of college saying, "I want to run a chamber someday." My background was in chemistry.

Lyn Wineman:

What?

Jason Ball:

Yeah, I got my start working for two Lincoln startups that were chemistry companies.

Lyn Wineman:

I did not know that.

Jason Ball:

Yeah. I was miserable in the lab. I wanted to be around people. I wanted to get involved in building things bigger than me and through a series of just accidental events, I ended up running a small business development center in one of the UNL offices, which is now New Tech Ventures, and I was working there, knew all the bankers and startups in town and knew the layout of the university system and how to navigate some of those offices. And I was doing that work when the Chamber came and approached me and said, "Hey, Jason, do you want to do economic development?" I said, "Well, you don't want me, I don't know anything about economic development." And they said, "That's okay, we'll teach you that stuff. We want what you're doing now." And it ended up being five of the most rewarding years in my professional career, working here under my predecessor, Wendy Birdsall. And to answer your question, finally, my passion for this industry really came up because we make a difference in the lives of the people and families in this community.

Lyn Wineman:

Absolutely.

Jason Ball:

And so we talk a lot about, Hey, this is what's good for business, this is what's good for industry, this is how want to grow this economy. At the end of the day none of that really matters. What we're trying to do is create new opportunities for professional growth and for an increased quality of life in the lives of folks who live here. And that's what my passion for this business is.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah. I could see where that would be the kind of thing that you get out of bed today thinking I'm making life better for the people in my community and the businesses in my community. So, Jason, I can't believe it, but I think I met you about a decade ago. That sounds like a long time, doesn't it? And then you left for a while before returning to this role. You mentioned the beer scene has improved a bit

in Lincoln, which it really has, but what other changes did you notice when you came back and anything that really surprised you?

Jason Ball:

Yeah. So obviously when I left the... What is now Pinnacle Bank Arena had not yet been opened. It was nearly complete. So it was-

Lyn Wineman:

It's hard to imagine downtown Lincoln now without Pinnacle Bank Arena.

Jason Ball:

Yes. Look, I remember arguing with the folks who were going to vote against that authorization of the spending that was required locally. And they were saying, "Oh, Jason, Pinnacle Bank Arena is going to irrevocably change the Haymarket." And I rolled my eyes at that time and thought, well, these folks were just being silly. The Haymarket's still going to be amazing. We're just going to have another asset there. You come back and you go, wow. The Haymarket is in fact still very amazing. It's wonderful. But the Pinnacle Bank Arena really changed it too.

Lyn Wineman:

It did.

Jason Ball:

And so I was wrong about that. But yeah, so, obviously all the changes in downtown. So we've seen East Campus build out, we've seen the Telegraph District build out, we've seen West Haymarket build out in the middle of downtown. We've seen some changes in terms of more housing is getting built. Large businesses are moving to different areas. Maybe not in the central downtown, we've had some state offices lead. And so all of that is going to... I'm not saying it's necessarily good or bad. I think a lot of businesses are seeing opportunity in that. I'm still looking for what that's going to mean in the net impact to our economy as the relative changes to residential versus business and commercial in downtown change.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah, my husband and I talk frequently that if we were in our twenties again, it would be really fun to live downtown. Right? And be near all the fun and just in the middle of it all. And that really wasn't an option back in the day. So I think that's really great to see that happen. So, as a follow up to that last question, I'm curious what you've been doing over the last nine years and how those experiences of living and working in other cities have impacted you and prepared you most for your current role.

Jason Ball:

Yeah. So for folks that may not know I left Lincoln. I was the director of business development for the Lincoln partnership for economic development. And I left at the very end of 2012. And I left to advance my career, had an opportunity to move to a community called Hutchinson, Kansas, northwest of Wichita by 45 minutes and run their chamber. And the best thing about that place was, again, it was organized as a combined chamber economic development and CVB organization. And little 10-person office, got to do some regional work down there with the Wichita Chamber and Wichita economic development partners

there and had four amazing years there. And by then, my wife and I had both our kids. We were pretty happy, but opportunity came up to be the CEO and president of the Sioux Falls Area Chamber. That would bring us back closer to family.

Jason Ball:

And, Sioux Falls was a good experience for learning. They don't have, in my view, the most advantageous structure to how they're approaching things. That community is full of great people and good businesses that are doing some, I think, important work and regionally, obviously they're an important area to learn from, but Sioux Falls was not a fit for me and what I was trying to do with that organization. And so I ended up getting approached by a recruiter one day. It said, "Look, this opportunity's come up in Round Rock, Texas." I said, "Where's Round Rock, Texas?" The immediate north suburb to Austin. And so Round Rock was fun because you get all of the fun things about Austin, but you're far enough away so the bad things about Austin-

Lyn Wineman:

Ah, that sounds lovely actually, right. Austin, one of the hottest cities in America, but also some problems there, big problems.

Jason Ball:

Yeah. Big challenges and for all the fun reasons. And I think that's really what I took out of that experience there. So for those who don't know, Round Rock's claim to fame is that is the home of Dell Technologies, corporate headquarters. At its peak, it was 13,000 employees coming to work at corporate headquarters daily. And so, got to do a lot of corporate work down there. The only time in my career I've really had to do urban economic development. And it's a very different game when you don't have... If you drive far enough in any direction in Lincoln, Nebraska, sooner or later, you are going to hit a cornfield.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah. There's room to grow, room to grow. Yeah.

Jason Ball:

That's not the case in central Texas. And so you really have to look at how you're going to reuse and revitalize certain areas. You have to look at where there are underutilized or just crumbling buildings. And so that's really what the work there was and what I took with me. And then the last thing I'll add is that is where I was when the pandemic hit. And probably the work that I'm proudest of is a program called Round Rock Cares. I will never forget sitting in the room with our mayor and city managers the day that the Travis and Williamson counties in Texas announced their stay home, stay safe orders. And we were in the room. We were probably the only four people in downtown that day. The rest of our downtown was just vacant. Everyone was afraid to be out.

Jason Ball:

And we were saying to ourselves, what in the world are we going to do? And out of that conversation, I committed some money, city committed some money. I approached Dell Technologies - please give us some money. We approached the community foundation. In seven days, we had acquired and had a press conference to announce our first a hundred thousand dollars of Round Rock Cares funds. Funds that were there to go to a maximum of \$7,500 to a small business to help them pay their bills, electric

bill, pay their rent, pay their people if they needed to, things to help them survive whatever was going to happen. And we didn't know at that time. That fund ended up raising over \$420,000. Those resources ended up going to over 240 businesses. And the first checks were out the door before the PPP loan application was finalized.

Lyn Wineman:

That's amazing. Those early days were scary. They were scary for small businesses. We didn't know. We just didn't have any idea. What's funny to me is there was even a time when we thought this was going to last for two weeks or a month. And, at the time that seemed daunting, Jason. So congratulations for that program. And I know that actually leads into the next question I wanted to ask you. I know you weren't in Lincoln during the pandemic, but I know you're aware of some of the things that the Lincoln Chamber did to help the community when the pandemic hit. Are there any of those efforts still going?

Jason Ball:

I would say yes, in so far as we have been very involved in how the ARPA Funds and that's the American Recovery Plan Act, ARPA-

Lyn Wineman:

Thank you for remembering that. I always know the acronym, but can't always remember what it stands for.

Jason Ball:

So, I think everyone will recall that the federal government has done two big rounds of federal assistance. The first was the Cares Act and that's what PPP emerged out of. And this chamber was very involved in helping businesses plug into PPP and other resources came out of that. And then in the early days of the Biden administration, they had the ARPA funds, American Recovery Plan Act. And we are still in the legislative session was dominated by how we are going to apply Nebraska's allocation of ARPA dollars. And it was a total of a billion dollars came-

Lyn Wineman:

It's a lot of money.

Jason Ball:

To Nebraska. How are we going to spend this? And this is where ideas as diverse as sporting facilities, ball fields came out, as well as I'll call it the governor's comprehensive state water resources plan came out. And that's where it was canals and Lake McConaughy updates in the west side of the state, some changes to Niobrara River access for Niobrara River tourism. And then the big item out here was the proposed lake in between Omaha and Lincoln and what that would potentially mean and how in the world would we find room for a lake twice as big as Okoboji. And so that is still ongoing. And that's just one example. There are internship resources. There are airport resources. There are, again, just, there are hundreds of ways this money is being applied and we're still working with that.

Lyn Wineman:

You know, that's one reason why being a business owner in Lincoln, Nebraska, I never complain about paying my very reasonably priced chamber dues because I know that you're out there advocating for the

things that I don't have the time or always the knowledge to do. And so you're out there looking out for the rest of us. So we really do appreciate. I know one thing that the Chamber did in Lincoln was the pledge, the pledge to allocate 1% of expenses in support of local businesses. Can you talk a bit more about that initiative and how it started and where it's going?

Jason Ball:

Yeah. I'll be happy to, I'll just predicate this with, I was not here when this happened, so I can't take any credit for it and may not have all the details. But look, when the pandemic hit and community leaders everywhere around the nation was having that same conversation with their mayor that I had with mine in Texas, which what the heck is going to happen, your mind immediately goes to small businesses. Large businesses, yeah, they're going to get impacted. And we didn't know what that was going to look like, but small businesses you're basically asking them to hold their breath.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah.

Jason Ball:

Right? And holding their breath for small businesses, how long can I use whatever cash I happen to have on hand, keep paying bills and people until I run out. And so there was a lot of efforts back then to say, how can we drive people to use their small local business, just a little bit more, be a little bit more intentional about it because for a small business that makes a big impact. And that's where the 1% pledge came from. If you look at large business and industry anywhere, they're running budgets that are up in the tens of millions, sometimes hundreds of millions of dollars.

Jason Ball:

And so that 1% really adds up to a big impact from that one business on the economy and the net effect of several of our larger quarter per partners really adds up. And so, this was part of our pandemic recovery plan. And the last thing I'll add to that too, Lyn is, this is also everyone who was stuck at home started buying a whole lot of stuff that showed up in a van on your porch.

Lyn Wineman:

That did not come from Lincoln unless you were very thoughtful about making that order.

Jason Ball:

Yeah. And so it was also trying to get people just think a little bit differently about, again, I know times are scary. I know you got to put a mask on or it might not feel as comfortable as it used to, but do get out and support your local business or for heaven's sake, ask them to deliver that product. These are the things where stores are always on my heart. I've bought I can't remember how many pairs of running shoes in the Lincoln Running Company. And that's a product that is in some ways easy to order online. But, getting people to think about, go out and use that company. And I know that in Ringland was on her bike delivering shoes.

Lyn Wineman:

Oh yeah. Nobody fits you for a running shoe. I don't even run and I like to go there and be fitted for the running shoes I wear for walking and hiking. So Jason thinking long term, then, let's look in the future.

Let's hope there's no pandemics in the next decade or so. Right? Thinking long term here, are there any big initiatives or goals you're looking forward to overseeing as the president of the Lincoln chamber?

Jason Ball:

Yes. We've got some large ongoing projects and these are recruitment projects for the most part. So I'm excited when I can speak about those more candidly in a public setting. We're also, and this has been out in the media, we've worked with a group called CSL that has made five recommendations about where a convention center might need to be located generally in the downtown area. At the time of this recording, that we still have five options for that and we have not picked a preference. But it's going to be exciting to see that come to fruition. I'm very confident that's going to happen. And then I get to give Jeff more credit for leading that initiative, as well as the conversation about expanded sporting facilities, baseball fields for our community, that's going to help drive more tourism and be a local asset that we get to use.

Jason Ball:

And then the last one I'll add is we are entering into this year, a formalized, very robust, strategic planning process. It will be a community based strategic plan. And so we are looking at large community initiatives. Again here. I'm thinking about Pinnacle Bank Arena, LO valley project, like large community infrastructure that we need to be thinking about to drive the community forward. And that can take a lot of different turns as well. It may include some of the things that we're talking about now. It may include other sporting facilities. It may include some more, I'll call it more boring stuff that's really important. Like second source of water is a conversation that Lincoln is going to need to have.

Lyn Wineman:

That's really boring until you run out of water and then people get quite excited about it, right?

Jason Ball:

Yeah. Just wait till you can't get a drink from the tap and then that's going to be a pretty scary situation. And again, we're here to drive economic vitality. Growth is implied in that.

Lyn Wineman:

Absolutely.

Jason Ball:

So those are the things that we're thinking about and excited about working on.

Lyn Wineman:

I love the beginning of a strategic planning process where just everything is on the table. And you hit that point where it's kind of overwhelming because there's so many different directions we can go, but I'm excited to see what you and your team and the community do with that. So, I am also excited to ask you this next question, because it's my favorite question. Everyone who listens to the podcast knows this is my favorite question, because I'm inspired by motivational quotes, Jason, and I would love to have a Jason Ball original quote to inspire our listeners.

Jason Ball:

Well, the words that I've always tried to live by every day when I show up at the office is make a difference.

Lyn Wineman:

I love that.

Jason Ball:

I could add to it, make a difference every day. I have the great honor and pleasure and responsibility to show up and do my best to make an impact every day. And, thankfully does not just rest on my shoulders. We have an awesome staff team. We have an awesome board and leadership team and groups wrapped around us. But at the end of the day, what our stakeholders in the community are asking us to do is make a difference in growing the economic vitality of Lincoln. That's what I try to do every day.

Lyn Wineman:

Good for you. Honestly, that is fantastic. I think when you know you're making a difference, when you have that purpose behind you, whatever role you play, I think it just makes the day go by faster and the things that you do that much more exciting. It's also great to work with other people who are also committed to making a difference. So Jason, for our listeners who would like to know more about your work, the Chamber of Commerce, what's going on in the city, how can they find out more?

Jason Ball:

You can find everything under the sun about all the programs that we've talked about today if you go to LCOC.com as in Lincoln Chamber of Commerce.com, or you can find it on Google. Lyn, thank you very much for sharing with everyone who's listening that our membership dues are quite reasonable.

Lyn Wineman:

They are very reasonable.

Jason Ball:

And so we would love to talk to anyone about becoming a member. If you want to have that conversation, I encourage those folks to contact Shannon Hanke on our staff and her information is on again, LCOC.com. She can walk you through what those options might look like.

Lyn Wineman:

Great. Thanks for making that link easy. And we'll have that in the show notes on the website as well. Jason, I have so enjoyed reconnecting with you and hearing about what you've been doing, hearing about what you've got up your sleeve for the future. As we wrap up our time together today, what is the most important thing you would like our listeners to remember about the work that you're doing?

Jason Ball:

Oh boy, I think two things come to mind. One, this is an organization. We're the only organization in town that's tasked with this, of building economic vitality across all the ways we've been talking about it. So please know, we are thinking big picture and we are always looking for other folks who are thinking big picture to join us. As an extension of that, Omaha is part of that picture with us. They're a partner,

not a competitor. They are an asset to what we're going to be able to accomplish in Lincoln. And I think what we're doing in Lincoln is going to be an asset to them. And so that's what comes to mind.

Lyn Wineman:

Ah, that is really exciting stuff. Jason, so great to reconnect with you. I fully believe the world needs more people like you, more communities like Lincoln and organizations like the Lincoln Chamber of Commerce. Thank you for taking time to share with us today.

Jason Ball:

My pleasure. Thank you.

Announcer:

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