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A WORD FROM THE CEO CHRIS HARDIE



Please take our workforce housing survey

Attracting, hiring and retaining quality workers continues to be a top priority for businesses

across the 7 Rivers Region. Even with some current economic uncertainty, the demographics show that our region continues to age, and we need to attract younger families.

But we cannot attract those families without adequate workforce housing. To better understand our regional housing needs, we have created the 7 Rivers Alliance Housing Consortium. The consortium consists of regional business, government and organizational leaders who have recognized the challenges of affordable workforce housing. We believe it is a challenge best understood and met at a regional level.

We are asking for your help to gather more information. Please take a few minutes to fill out our survey. The survey will help us better understand the need and greater alignment between the workforce shortages in our region and the housing required to address those needs.

Along with an [employer survey](#), we also are conducting [an employee survey](#). The results will be shared with regional leaders so that we can take actionable steps to address both workforce and housing shortages. We would encourage you to take the appropriate survey and please pass along the other survey to your employees.

Your participation in this effort is vital. Your individual information will be strictly confidential. There may be a question you cannot answer, but please do your best.

I know your time is precious. We wouldn't ask for some of it without a good cause. Thank you for your consideration.

[Employee survey](#)

[Employer survey](#)

Amazing Rising Stars

My thanks go out to this year's recipients of our annual Rising Stars Under 40 awards and to friends and family who came to our reception on Oct. 20. We had a record crowd and as noted by many attending, there was a special energy in the air. There is a lot of uncertainty in our world today, but we can be certain that our future is in good hands if our winners have anything to say about it.



[Chris Hardie](#)

7 Rivers Alliance CEO

chris@7riversalliance.org



LADCO promoting development properties

The La Crosse Area Development Corporation (LADCO) is a not-for-profit, member-driven, economic development organization which has been operating for more than 50 years to assist businesses and our partners in growing the



economy of La Crosse County and the surrounding area. One of LADCO's roles is to facilitate real estate solutions within the La Crosse County region. Below are a few featured properties within the Coulee Region.

Former Trane Building, La Crosse, WI



The former Trane headquarters is on the market! Located at 3600 Pammel Creek Road in La Crosse, WI, this property covers 41 acres and is comprised of two different buildings. This site has a great location near US Highway 14 and Highway 33. For more information, contact Bill Bonifas at CBRE, william.bonifas@cbre.com or at (414) 274-1606.

Bluffview Business Park, Holmen, WI

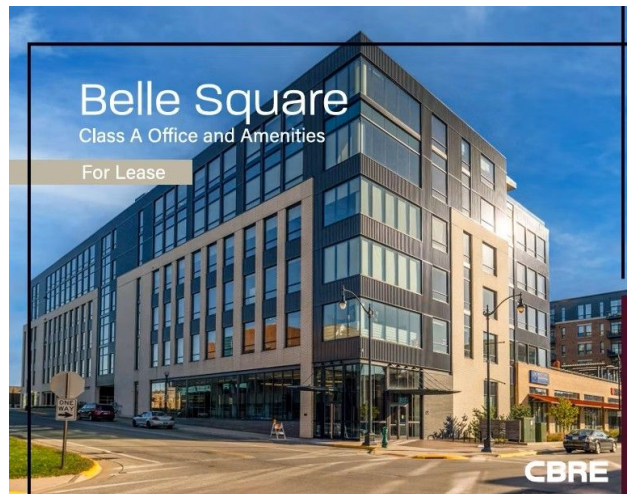
Commercial/Industrial sites in the Village of Holmen. 7+ Acres on Main Street, 3.95 Acres on Gaarder Road and 10+ Acres at Rivers Drive. For more details, please contact: Chuck Olson at Coldwell Banker River Valley Realtors.

COLDWELL BANKER
COMMERCIAL
RIVER VALLEY



03/15/2022

Belle Square, La Crosse, WI



Belle Square offers a dynamic mix of retail, residential, and Class A office at the center of downtown La Crosse. With approximately 6,000-58,755 SF available to lease, the opportunities are endless! Contact Chase Brieman at (608) 441-7571 or James West at (608) 441-7578 for additional information. Check out the full brochure [here](#).

Former town hall near West Salem, WI

Are you looking for a fantastic location for your business or restaurant? High traffic and easy access to Interstate 90 are key factors for this prime real estate. The former town hall is located at N5105 Leonard St. in Hamilton, WI, and covers 7,500 square feet.

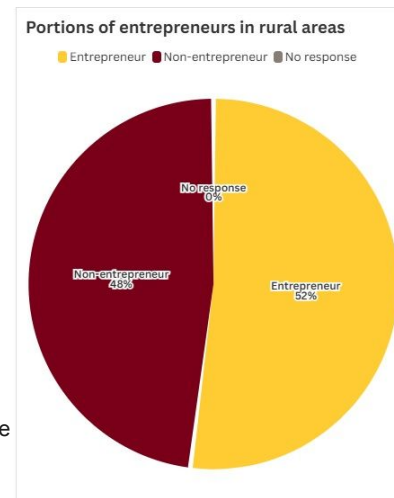
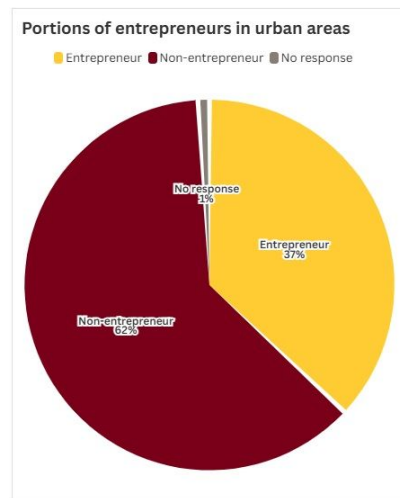
To check out the Town of Hamilton former town hall building listing, click [here!](#)



More rural startups in WI and MN

University of Minnesota Extension

For leaders in Minnesota and Wisconsin, gaining insight into how residents and entrepreneurs view the economic landscape is not always easy. Traditional data sources often provide broad trends but fall short of capturing local perspectives, the lived experiences of entrepreneurs, or the differences between rural and urban communities. The Midwest Entrepreneurial Climate Survey, a joint project with the University of Wisconsin-Madison, was designed to fill that gap.



Last
summe
r, we
asked
respon

dents whether they had ever owned, started, or discontinued a business. Anyone who answered “yes” to one or more of these questions was considered an entrepreneur. Overall, 41.3% of participants identified as entrepreneurs. Rural residents were significantly more likely to do so, with 52% reporting entrepreneurial activity compared to 37% in urban areas.

A closer look reveals what drives this gap. Nearly 15% more rural residents reported owning a business, and almost 15% more had started one. This trend also appears among those who have discontinued a business, though the difference is smaller, with rural respondents still reporting a higher share. These findings may challenge the common perception that rural areas are less economically dynamic. The data instead points to a different story. Rural communities are actively contributing to entrepreneurship and show higher rates of business ownership and startups.

North Holmen is designated certified site

On Oct. 1, the North Holmen Development Area was officially designated a [Wisconsin Certified Site](#). Dairyland, in partnership with [Riverland Energy Cooperative](#), XeteX, Mathy Construction, the Village of Holmen and La Crosse County, have been working together to develop the site, located at the intersection of Highways 35 and 53.

The area is a prime spot for industrial and commercial growth. The project was also recognized in October 2024 by the La Crosse Area Development Corporation (LADCO) with the Triangle of Achievement Award, which celebrates strong partnerships that drive economic development in the region.

Certified in Wisconsin is a program offered by the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) to make development-ready sites more appealing to businesses. The 7 Rivers Alliance was part of this nomination process.

The program ensures all necessary site due diligence is completed upfront, solving many of the unknowns that can delay construction. This allows businesses looking to grow or expand to move forward quickly and with confidence.

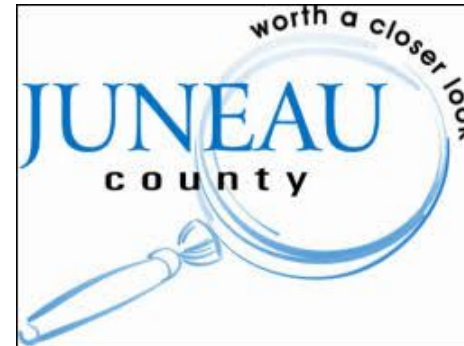
“This certification is a significant step in promoting economic investment in the La Crosse County region and serves as a great example of the Cooperative Principles Cooperation Among Cooperatives and Concern for Community,” Manager, Community and Economic Development Christopher Giesen said. “Special thanks to Dairyland’s Key Accounts Manager



Jenny Radcliffe, who was instrumental in advancing this project.”

Juneau County grant window is now open

The next grant



window for Round 3 of the Juneau County Economic Development is open through through 12/31/25 and will award microgrants of up to \$5,000 each for costs incurred when starting a new business in Juneau County.

All details are available on our website www.JuneauCounty.com, and click on the left side orange button [SMALL BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT GRANT](#). Click the button for ROUND 3 and you can apply right online.

All grant inquiries can be sent to submission@juneaucounty.com.

Vernon County businesses receive grant funding

Sixteen Vernon County businesses have been selected to receive a total of \$150,000 in grant funding through the Elevate Vernon Grant Program, a new initiative designed to help local entrepreneurs start, strengthen, and grow their businesses right here in Vernon County.

In addition to direct financial support, the Elevate Vernon Program provides pathway navigation and resource connection through Vernon County Economic Development — helping business owners access free and low-cost tools, trainings, and expert guidance available through regional and statewide partners.

The program is funded by a Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) Small Business Development Grant and administered by the Vernon County Community Development Department.

“Vernon County is committed to supporting the small businesses that are the backbone of our local economy,” said Larkin Breckel, Vernon County Economic Development and Marketing Coordinator. “This program was shaped by feedback from small businesses across the county who shared their greatest needs: greater access to flexible funding, and help connecting to resources that build their capacity and skills. We’re thrilled to help business owners and entrepreneurs seize new opportunities — and, in doing so, strengthen our local economy.”

Grant recipients represent a wide range of industries and communities across the county, from downtown revitalization projects to value added farm upgrades and building and manufacturing. Each grant is designed to help recipients invest in



critical business needs such as equipment, building improvements, marketing, or startup costs.

2025 Elevate Vernon Grant Recipients are:

- Attention 2 Detail – Viroqua – Equipment to increase options for customers
- Birch Point Distillery – Westby – Marketing materials and signage for new distillery.
- Driftless Pole Barn – Viola – Equipment to increase efficiency, safety, and project capacity.
- Driftless Seed Supply – Sterling Township and Viroqua – Equipment to enhance processing.
- Driftless Veterinary – La Farge – Building a small animal veterinary suite to expand on-site services.
- Havlik Custom Wrapping – La Farge – Improving bale wrapping efficiency and materials to support farms.
- Hidden Springs Creamery – Westby – Adding packaging equipment to expand distribution.
- Jovita's Kitchen – Hillsboro – Upgrading equipment and expanding offerings.
- Kickapoo Hardware – La Farge – Enhancing building façade and signage to improve visibility and appeal.
- May Queen Floral – Hillsboro – Opening a new flower shop with expanded expertise in wedding floral design.
- Noble Rind – Viroqua – Expanding catering offerings with upgraded equipment, space, and marketing.
- Pleasant Valley Seniors – Stoddard – Upgrades to enhance safety, accessibility, and facility appeal.
- Rhythm Bakery – Viroqua – Expanding product line with upgraded equipment.
- Schiffer Services – De Soto – Renovating a downtown storefront as part of a larger artisan and housing project.
- Viroqua Aronia Co – Viroqua – Strengthening digital presence and regional market reach through upgraded content and campaigns.
- WayPoints – Viroqua – Investments in infrastructure to launch a specialized digital marketing business.

Ron Wanek 2025 Technical Education Champion



WTCS President Layla Merrifield, Western President Roger Stanford, award recipient Founder and Chairman of Ashley Furniture Industries Ron Wanek, and Western Associate Vice President of Workforce Partnerships and Innovation Josh Gamer are pictured as Ron accepts the 2025 Technical Education Champion Award during the WTCS District Boards Association meeting on October 17.

Western Technical College is proud to announce that Ron Wanek, founder and chairman of Ashley Furniture Industries, has been named the 2025 Technical Education Champion (TECh) by the Wisconsin Technical College District Boards Association.

The TECh Award recognizes community and industry leaders who demonstrate an exemplary level of partnership with their local technical college to promote technical education and economic development.

“Ron Wanek has been an extraordinary partner to Western and to technical education across Wisconsin,” said Western President Roger Stanford. “His vision and generosity have expanded access to high-quality training, strengthened our workforce, and improved countless lives. He truly embodies what it means to be a technical education champion.”

Through the Ronald and Joyce Wanek Foundation, Wanek has provided transformational support to technical education in western Wisconsin. Through the Foundation’s major investment in the Wanek Center of Innovation at Western, they are helping create K-12 pathways into advanced manufacturing careers, equipping current programs with cutting-edge technology in cybersecurity, IoT, data analytics, automation, and mechatronics, and upskilling the regional workforce to meet the demands of Industry 4.0 and beyond.

Beyond his financial support, Wanek has been deeply engaged in workforce development and advocacy. When Ashley Furniture employees needed robotics training, he brought the equipment to Western and worked with college leaders to upskill faculty. He has met with state officials and educational partners to strengthen transferability, career pathways, and workforce readiness across Wisconsin.

Wanek and his team at Ashley Furniture continue to collaborate with Western by hiring graduates, hosting educators from across the country, serving on advisory committees, and promoting the importance of technical education to the company's 18,000 employees nationwide.

"I am honored to receive this recognition from the Wisconsin Technical College District Boards Association," said Ron Wanek. "America's manufacturing future isn't guaranteed; it must be earned. Through the Wanek Center of Innovation and our partnership with Western Technical College, we're opening doors for the next generation of makers and innovators. We must continue to invest in upskilling our workforce and support the students and educators who will shape our nation's future for generations to come."

"Ron has shown what true partnership looks like," Stanford added. "He doesn't just invest in education—he invests in people. His commitment has changed lives, strengthened our communities, and elevated the role of technical education as the cornerstone of economic prosperity."

Lansing ferry service across river begins

The Iowa and Wisconsin Departments of Transportation are partnering to offer a free car ferry across the Mississippi River during the closure of the IA 9 / WIS 82 bridge. This service connects Lansing, Iowa, with Wisconsin near De Soto and Ferryville while the new bridge is under construction.

- Hours of operation: Seven days a week
- First trip: 5:30 AM from Wisconsin, 5:45 AM from Iowa
- Last trip: 9:00 PM from Wisconsin, 9:15 PM from Iowa
- Frequency: Continuous, not on a fixed schedule—first-come, first-served
- Commuter Traffic Priority: To support more efficient travel for daily commuters, we kindly request that priority access to the car ferry be given to commuter traffic during peak hours: 5:30–7:30 a.m. and 3:30–5:30 p.m. We encourage non-commuters to consider traveling outside these windows when possible.

For more information about the ferry schedule and holiday hours, check the [Iowa DOT page](#).

Ferry Locations



Data Center town hall meeting held in Harmony

The Dairyland Power Cooperative Economic Development team assisted MiEnergy Cooperative and the City of Harmony in hosting a community town hall meeting in early October to provide education on data center development.

MiEnergy, with assistance from Dairyland, identified Harmony as a great location for data center development because of several important factors, including available electric capacity, access to a strong fiber optic internet backbone, and proximity to regional businesses and institutions with large data needs.

MiEnergy has secured an option to purchase 60 acres of land and has begun working with city leaders to annex and appropriately zone the property to be marketed as a shovel-ready technology industrial park.

While no end-use development projects have been secured, the City of Harmony hosted the town hall event to proactively and openly discuss opportunities and concerns with residents. Over 150 people were in attendance and the comments gathered will help MiEnergy, the City and Dairyland secure a project that is a good fit for the community.



"It was our pleasure to help MiEnergy and Harmony with this conversation," Christopher Giesen, Dairyland's Manager, Community and Economic Development said. "Hearing the community's concerns directly and being able to have real conversations was very beneficial for all. We are always looking for opportunities to proactively pursue sound growth opportunities."

Main Street Apartments opens in Viroqua

WKBT

VIROQUA, Wis. — City officials celebrated the opening of Main Street Apartments on Oct. 10, a 65-unit workforce housing development that combines affordable apartments with a childcare facility for working families in western Wisconsin.

The development features housing units, retail space and a 6,000-square-foot childcare facility called the Bumble and Bloom Early Learning Center. The center will serve approximately 65 children ranging from six weeks to six years old.

La Crosse-based VARC will operate the early learning center, which city leaders say addresses a critical need for working families in the area.

Governor Tony Evers attended Friday's ribbon-cutting ceremony and praised the community-wide effort that made the development possible.



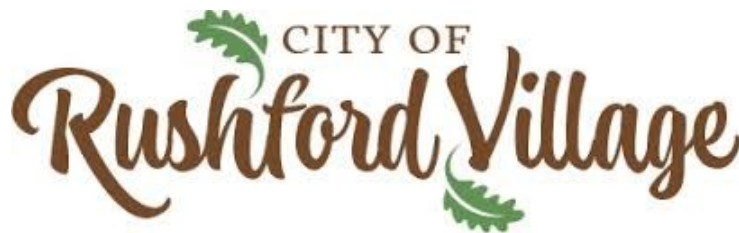
Rushford Village mulls business, housing options

Kirsten Zoellner/Fillmore County Journal

At the October 21 meeting, the Rushford Village council welcomed Community Economic Development Associates' community and business development specialist Jayme Longmire. Along with City Attorney Joe O'Koren, they discussed options for using the Revolving Loan Fund to bolster business and housing needs. The fund currently sits at over \$200,000 and is not being utilized by anyone.

The purpose of the revolving loan fund is for business establishment or growth, serving as gap financing for eligible projects. Longmire looked into Minnesota state statutes regarding the funds, which were initially given for flood recovery, to determine allowable uses. She also contacted the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development, which provided the funds. In particular, Longmire looked into whether or not the funding can be used for housing development and infrastructure upgrades should the village decide to create a subsection of the Revolving Loan Fund for those types of projects.

Based on the original purpose of the relief funds, O’Koren noted one statute did present an issue. It requires the establishment of a business development corporation and with it, a board. After review, O’Koren didn’t believe it was a benefit to the village.



“I think it’s a great idea, in theory,” he added. “The bigger scope is that development is just expensive. Even if you do have these sorts of funds available for infrastructure, that’s only going to cover a certain portion of the project.”

In development projects, the financial security in the development agreement needs to be put up front. This calls for enough money at the forefront of any development. Other concerns include lots not selling and project guidelines of workforce housing. It is clear the funding is not intended for 2.5-acre lots in the village’s current subdivision guidelines.

“I think we ran into a dead end with the statutory framework they sent us,” concluded O’Koren.

[Full story](#)

Mayo breaks ground on Sparta hospital

Mayo Clinic Health System staff, leaders and community members and dignitaries gathered on Wednesday, Oct. 22, to celebrate the official groundbreaking of the new hospital in Sparta.

The ceremony featured remarks from Mayo Clinic Health System leaders and other guest speakers, and a ceremonial turning of the soil to commemorate the start of construction. Mayo leaders expressed their excitement for the new facility and reaffirmed Mayo Clinic Health System’s commitment to enhancing patient care for the community.

“I want to express my sincere appreciation to our leaders for their vision, commitment and unwavering pursuit of healthcare excellence,” says Richard Helmers, M.D., vice president, Mayo Clinic Health System Wisconsin. “I am equally grateful to our staff for the compassion, dedication and exceptional care they provide to our patients each and every day. Together, we make a difference—not only within the walls of our hospital and clinics, but throughout the communities we are privileged to serve. With this new hospital, we will continue to build upon this proud tradition of excellence and service.”

“As we continue to invest in our facilities across Mayo Clinic Health System, we remain deeply dedicated to providing rural communities with access to exceptional care and treatment close to home,” says Prathibha Varkey, M.B.B.S., M.B.A., president, Mayo Clinic Health System. “The hospital will expand our capacity for inpatient care, surgical services and specialized treatments, ensuring the exceptional care that defines Mayo Clinic Health System remains local, personal and accessible for generations to come.”

Highlights of the new hospital include:

- 25 inpatient rooms, several of which are specially equipped for bariatric care.
- A dedicated anesthesia room and two operating rooms, with the flexibility to add two more in the future as needs grow.
- Pre-operative and recovery rooms designed to provide patients with a seamless and comfortable surgical experience.

- A sterile processing room that supports the highest standards of quality, safety and efficiency.
- Six infusion chairs for infusion therapy, including chemotherapy.
- Inpatient rehabilitation equipment to help patients regain strength, mobility and independence close to home.
- An onsite hospital pharmacy to ensure timely access to medications and pharmaceutical care.

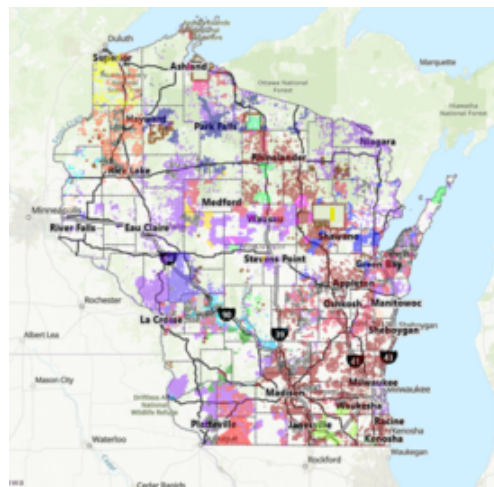
“These additions have been carefully planned to enhance patient care and elevate the overall experience for everyone who walks through our doors,” says Jessica Sosso, M.D., M.P.H., physician lead, Mayo Clinic Health System in Sparta. “They will allow us to continue meeting — and exceeding — the needs of our patients and families right here in our local communities.”



BEAD preliminary award map available

The Wisconsin Public Service Commission submitted the State's Broadband Equity Access and Deployment (BEAD) Program Final Proposal to the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) on Sept. 3.

The Final Proposal provides the results of Wisconsin's BEAD sub-granting process, and details preliminary awards intended to expand access to high-speed internet to more than 174,000 homes and businesses across the state.



The BEAD Final Proposal, as approved by the Commission, is preliminary and requires NTIA approval before awards can be finalized and construction of high-speed internet infrastructure can begin. Preliminary awards would provide funding to serve all BEAD-eligible locations throughout the state using a mix of fiber, fixed wireless and low Earth Orbit Satellite technologies. As the Wisconsin Broadband Office continues the curing and review process with NTIA, additional changes continue to be made. The Wisconsin Broadband Office has updated the [BEAD Preliminary Awardees Map](#).

On Nov. 18 at 2 p.m. UW Extension will host the webinar "[BEAD 2025: What Changed, What's Next and What Communities Can Do](#)." Due to changes in federal guidance, Wisconsin's Broadband Equity Access and Deployment (BEAD) program was required to restructure its sub-granting process. This UW Extension webinar will highlight key changes in the BEAD program and what they mean for

local broadband expansion. This webinar is designed for community leaders and broadband providers seeking to expand broadband access in their communities.

Study aims to boost housing, govern aesthetics

by GABRIEL HATHAWAY/Winona Post

Winona is short on housing but help is on the way. Winona city staff are working with consultants on multiple projects aimed at reforming housing rules and zoning codes to encourage additional housing development and help address Winona's urgent housing shortage.

This fall, one consultant is recommending zoning changes to encourage development, and others will conduct a housing survey to see what the community wants and next year will develop aesthetic rules to ensure those housing types fit into the community, according to staff.

Multiple housing studies have identified a severe lack of housing and a need for additional housing units of all types in Winona. The city's comprehensive plan reports that there is a rental vacancy rate of 0-2%, which is far below the 5% experts consider balanced.



Celebrate small business event Nov. 13

8:00 AM - 4:30 PM

UW-La Crosse Student Union

The WI Small Business Summit is a full day event for existing and start-up businesses in Wisconsin.

Existing businesses will be able to choose the resources they need by accessing various education topics and 1x1 sessions with business professionals and other resources.

Start-ups can access start-up sessions and support to learn and get assistance to get started.

This year's WI Small Business Summit will feature the Celebrate Small Business luncheon from 11:30 a.m.-1:15 p.m.

You can find more about and register to attend by accessing the SBDC calendar: [CLICK HERE](#)

If you have any questions, please email sbdc@uwlax.edu or call 1-608-785-8782.



LADCO Industry Appreciation Nov. 18

The La Crosse Area Development Corp. will hold its 28th annual Industry Appreciation event Tuesday, Nov. 18 from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. at Stoney Creek Hotel, 3060 S Kinney Coulee Rd, Onalaska.

Enjoy networking, a luncheon, keynote speaker Jon Reiner, and our annual awards presentation recognizing outstanding local achievements. Plus meet new Executive Director Vicki Markussen.

[To register](#)

11.18.25



LADCO's 28th Industry Appreciation



Featuring Keynote Speaker Jon Reiner
"Develop Your People and Thrive"



LADCO
LA CROSSE AREA DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

Briefly speaking:

- Fall 2025 Competitive Loan Applications for the [Restore Main Street](#), [Vacancy-to-Vitality](#), and [Infrastructure Access Loan Programs](#) are open through Nov. 21. Learn more about the Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority (WHEDA) competitive loan products created to increase affordable housing options across Wisconsin by visiting the product webpages to view award plans, loan term sheets, application examples, program checklists, and other resources.
- The Governors International Trade Awards Luncheon will be held Friday, Jan. 30 at the JW Marriott Minneapolis Mall of America. The Minnesota Trade Office (MTO) along with Governor Tim Walz, Department of Employment and Economic Development Commissioner Matt Varilek, and Department of Agriculture Commissioner Thom Petersen will host a luncheon event to honor this year's recipients of the 40th Annual Governor's International Trade Awards.
- [Registration is NOW open](#) for 2026 WEDA Legislative Day, which will be held on Wednesday, Jan. 21, in Madison, WI. Take advantage of this unique opportunity to make your voice heard on key WEDA legislative issues that aim to spark economic growth and prosperity across Wisconsin.
- The Western Wisconsin Women's Business Center 22nd Annual Women's Business Conference is Wednesday, Nov. 12 from 7:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. at the Pablo Center in Eau Claire. [REGISTER HERE](#)
- Jami Gerke has joined Dairyland's Economic Development team as an Economic Development Specialist as of September 2025. In this role, Jami will lead and manage Dairyland's USDA Rural Economic Development Loan and Grant (REDLG) program and the Revolving Loan Fund (RLF) to benefit Dairyland's member cooperatives and local communities.
- Engage Winona will hold a Foundations for Future Prosperity Covening on Thursday, November 13, 8 - 11:45 a.m. at Winona County Historical Society, Wanek Hall. Rural sociologist Ben Winchester will present. The event is free, with RSVPs requested here due to room capacity: <https://forms.gle/hUfEjvu3ShhnKSJb8>.

- La Crosse County Administrator Jane Klekamp has been announced as the inaugural 2025 Tribute to Outstanding Women “Legacy Award” Honoree by [YWCA La Crosse](#). Learn more about the YWCA's Tribute to Outstanding Women 2025 event, which is Nov. 6, [here](#).

Thank you to 7 Rivers Alliance Members & Investors!

We at 7 Rivers Alliance are eager for the opportunities for our region in the upcoming year. We will continue to uplift and support the positive changes in our region and remind you of our gratitude. Our successes would not be possible without the unwavering support of our incredible members and investors.

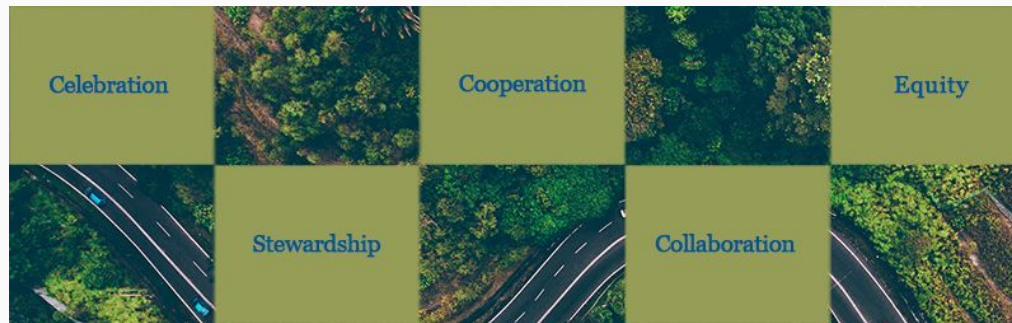
The dedication of our members and investors shines brightly as we advocate for our regional economy. Together, we are building a brighter future for our region, one opportunity at a time. Stay tuned for exciting updates on our upcoming initiatives, as we continue to engage in important conversations and drive positive change in the region. Thank you for being an essential part of our journey.

Learn more about [becoming a member!](#)

WISCONSIN

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT





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