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## WEDC celebrates Wisconsin Main Street success stories *Communities' achievements honored at 34<sup>th</sup> annual Main Street Awards ceremony in downtown Menomonie*

**MADISON, WI. March 13, 2025** – A downtown that preserves its historic character, serves as a central place for residents to gather and engage, and provides opportunities for businesses to grow is one of the keys to a thriving community.

Eagle River, Ladysmith, and Ripon are three communities that demonstrate the vital role downtowns play in their community. They were among the 15 communities honored for their downtown revitalization projects at the 34th Wisconsin Main Street Awards Ceremony held at the Mable Tainter Theater in Menomonie on Thursday.

"Downtowns are the commercial and cultural centers of communities," said Alan Christianson, city administrator in Ladysmith. "They are a place where residents and visitors get together to socialize, dine, and shop. Downtown provides one of the strongest ties to the history of the community. A healthy and vibrant downtown reflects well on the community as a whole."

Eagle River was named the 2024 Wisconsin Main Street of the Year, an honor recognizing the city's efforts to become a thriving, historic, and community center city where economic opportunity, cultural heritage, and local creativity come together to build a brighter future.

"The projects we've worked on — whether it's revitalizing spaces, expanding opportunities for businesses, or preserving our history — feel like common-sense efforts to make Eagle River a better place for everyone," said Karen Margelofsky, executive director of the Eagle River Revitalization Program. "We never set out to win awards; we simply focus on what's best for our community."

That focus includes earning a National Historic Registry Listing designation; expanding the farmers' market to include not only produce, but also local artists and education on the importance of healthy eating and sustainable agriculture; the creation of a community square to serve as the social and economic anchor for the downtown's public art initiatives; and a program to support and empower the next generation of entrepreneurs.

"Each piece strengthens both downtown and the entire city, shaping Eagle River into a destination that inspires innovation, fosters deep community connections, and leaves a lasting impact on everyone who experiences it," Margelofsky said.

Creating a lasting impact is exactly what Ladysmith did with a three-pronged project that was recognized with the Connect Communities Revitalization Award-Small Community.

**LOOK FORWARD ►**

The city undertook a complete rebuild of Miner Avenue, replacing underground utility lines that had been in place since 1911, ensuring modern infrastructure for the future.

It also restored an 80-year-old retail building that had been vacant for two decades. It now houses Connections Thrift store, the ICAA-Rusk County Food Pantry, and retail incubator, and provides essential services through the Indianhead Community Action Agency.

Finally, the city constructed a new pavilion and pedestrian-friendly space that creates a vibrant downtown gateway and permanent home for the Rusk County Farmers Market.

The city is already seeing the impact.

Visitor traffic downtown has increased, with approximately 1,900 visitors since the Connections Thrift Store opened five months ago. Sales at the Rusk County Farmers' Market is estimated to have increased 33% over the previous year and two new businesses are expected to open along Miner Avenue in 2025, Christianson said.

"Together these components contributed to a more attractive and welcoming downtown," Christianson said. "In a small community like ours, any one of these project components would have been a major accomplishment on its own, so to have the opportunity to tackle all three as part of a larger project by leveraging funding through a variety of sources and the collaboration of a number of community partners was huge."

In Ripon, the transformation of an unused building into a state-of-the-art brewing facility and brewpub was one of two projects recognized as the Best Total Building Transformation.

The Knuth Brewing Company renovation serves as the "vibrant event center in the heart of the community" and attracts residents and visitors alike to the downtown, said Craig Tebon, executive director of Ripon Main Street, Inc.

"Downtowns serves as the heart of the community, playing a vital role in economic, social, and cultural growth," Tebon said. "The Knuth Brewing Company is a central hub for our community."

Missy Hughes, Secretary and CEO of the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation and other WEDC leaders were on hand at Thursday's award ceremony to recognize the successful projects and initiatives executed by Main Street and Connect Communities programs around the state. Recognized projects included business and community development initiatives, building renovations, community celebrations, and revitalization success stories from across Wisconsin.

"Every day across Wisconsin, business and community leaders are looking for new ways to build an economy for all, where everyone has the opportunity to thrive. Our downtowns represent the heart and soul of our communities – and this year's Main Street Award winners represent the very best our state has to offer," said Missy Hughes, secretary and CEO of the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC), the state's leading economic development organization. "The Main Street Awards ceremony celebrates the hard work, vision and dedication of those who are working tirelessly behind the scenes to preserve and promote their downtowns."

The 2024 award winners include:

**Best New Business**

Andy's Pontoon Saloon has quickly become a cornerstone of downtown Eagle River, bringing energy, community engagement, and economic impact to the area. The business offers a pontoon fire pit and stage, live music, trivia, events, and a relaxed setting, creating a destination that mirrors the area's lakeside culture.

**Best Business Success Story**

Shepherd & Schaller Sporting Goods in Wausau opened in 1949 and celebrated its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2024 and has adapted over the years when trends and outside factors have warranted. The downtown sporting goods store now offers a brick-and-mortar shopping experience with online shopping and nationwide shipping capabilities.

**Best Placemaking Project**

Osceola Skate Park in Osceola began as a dream 15 years ago. It started as a grassroots vision of a downtown business owner and middle school students and grew into a community movement, raising over \$200,000.

**Best Business Support Initiative**

On Broadway, Inc., in Green Bay used a grant from the Wisconsin Department of Administration to create a local grant program aimed at helping diverse small businesses in the district. The grants allowed businesses to grow, purchase equipment, enhance their spaces, pay rent, and expand their services while also enriching the cultural and economic vibrancy of the district.

**Best Large-Scale Façade Rehabilitation**

The building at 114 W. Grand Ave. in Beloit regained its architectural character when then owners of the building worked with city officials, Downtown Beloit, and Wisconsin Main Street to come up with a way to bring the structure's upper façade back to its original architecture. The building now blends with its historic neighbors and adds a cohesiveness to the block that was missing.

**Best Downtown Retail Event**

Downtown Derby Days in Fond du Lac was an all-day Kentucky Derby 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration that drew adults from local community and beyond to celebrate, explore, shop, and dine. The event featured a variety of themed business-hosted activities, including Derby watch parties, live music and entertainment, shopping and dining specials, games, raffles, contests, and free carriage rides and photo opportunities with horses. It included 24 businesses and attracted 250 attendees, generating nearly \$25,000 in direct spending.

**Best Downtown Special Event**

Christkindlmarket on Broadway in Green Bay features six weekends of rotating vendors, igloo rentals, horse-drawn carriages, live entertainment, and holiday workshops. Nearly 30,000 visitors attended, generating nearly \$670,000 in local economic impact while supporting small businesses.

**Best Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging Initiative (Organization)**

Launched in 2024, the city of De Pere's Belonging Belongs Here Campaign aims to address the growing crisis of loneliness and social isolation. The initiative inspired meaningful connections through a variety of community-driven events, including a mural contest, presentations, public art, and a citywide social media campaign.

**Best Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging Initiative (Business)**

CW Creative Studios & Shop on Historic King Drive in Milwaukee is designed to foster collaboration, entrepreneurship, and community engagement among black and brown creatives and entrepreneurs. It blends a retail shop, event space, co-working lounge, and specialized studios into a hub for creatives, business owners, and organizations.

### **Best Interior Renovation**

Before its transformation, Northwoods Cycle in Rice Lake was a dim, outdated storefront that lacked warmth. The owners envisioned a space where cycling and coffee culture could unite. The renovation blended functionality with style and created a welcoming, multi-functional hub where people gather, recharge, and connect.

### **Connect Communities Revitalization Award – Large Community**

The City of West Bend's revitalization project demonstrates the power of collaboration between public and private sectors and focused on placemaking and activation strategies. With \$500,000 in investments, the project added 100 planters featuring shade trees and perennials, 32 hanging baskets, and integrated seating.

### **Best Small-Scale Façade Rehabilitation**

Ellen Pinnola was looking for a building with charm and character to house her business, Sweet Violet Floral Boutique in Platteville. She found old home and envisioned a cute, cozy, and welcoming floral cottage using natural light and unique architecture to showcase her floral designs. With the help of friends and family, Pinnola transformed the home for less than \$24,000, and made it a focal point in Platteville's downtown.

### **Best Business Marketing Campaign**

HMM Boutique in Tomahawk created the HMM Boutique Rewards Program as way of saying "thank you" to loyal customers. The program offers a special VIP Facebook group sneak peaks at new merchandise and specials. It also hosts seasonal and holiday promos, sipping sessions, and back-to-school and kids toy promotions.

### **Best Downtown Program Marketing Campaign**

The Green Bay Public Market Launch was a multi-week brand launch with activities that led up to the market's groundbreaking. The On Broadway marketing team created a brand and launch included an Instagram grid style logo, branch launch boxes, website, social profile photos, a press release, and media kit. The brand boxes were sent to 13 local and regional influencers.

Market on River in Chippewa Falls is a large indoor space that allows regional farmers a low-cost, direct-to-customer market for their goods. Upper floors house eight apartments, which are nearly fully leased, one short-term rental, and an event venue. The building also houses the headquarters for the Wisconsin Farmers Union. The \$8.2 million project created nearly 60 short-term construction jobs and is expected to support over 50 permanent positions.

### **2024 Wisconsin Main Street Hall of Fame Inductee**

Chris Olsen, of Rice Lake, is committed to the continued growth of the Rice Lake Main Street. A business and property owner, he serves on the Main Street board, was one of the individuals instrumental in the completion of a recent streetscape project and was one of the inaugural members of the Placemaking Committee. He has a commitment to making downtown Rice Lake stronger and more vibrant.

Individuals recognized for exemplary service include:

### **Executive Director Years of Service Awards**

- Jordan Nordby – Monroe (10 years)
- Shauna El-Amin – Beloit (13 years)
- Teri Ouimette – Chippewa Falls (14 years)
- Amy Hansen – Fond du Lac (18 years)
- Craig Tebon – Ripon (33 years)

**2024 Community Champions**

- Stephanie Kneuppel – Beloit
- Nancy Schuller – Eagle River
- Tracy Mathweg – Fond du Lac
- Julie Hill – Green Bay
- Jeff Frawley – Menomonie
- Stephani King – Monroe
- Sheila Ruchti – Platteville
- Jacqui Sharpe – Three Lakes
- Kathy Theil – Tigerton
- Mary Smith – Tomahawk

[Wisconsin Main Street](#) is a community development program administered by WEDC that targets Wisconsin's historic commercial districts. WEDC provides technical support and training to the 34 Main Street communities to help them revitalize their business districts based on guidelines developed by Main Street America.

Since the program's inception in 1987, Wisconsin Main Street community efforts have resulted in the creation of nearly 3,500 new businesses and more than 17,000 net new jobs, and over \$3 billion in public and private investment has occurred in these districts. During fiscal year 2024 alone, Wisconsin Main Street communities added 92 net new businesses and 589 net new jobs. None of this activity would be possible without the nearly 30,000 annual volunteer hours dedicated to the Main Street effort by passionate individuals from each community.

[Connect Communities Program](#) is a companion program to Wisconsin Main Street created in 2013 to provide access to resources and training to help communities pursue revitalization and redevelopment efforts. Over the past decade, 143 participating communities have added more than 970 net new businesses and attracted nearly \$5.4 billion in public and private investment.

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**ABOUT THE WISCONSIN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION**

The Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) leads economic development efforts for the state by advancing and maximizing opportunities in Wisconsin for businesses, communities and people to thrive in a globally competitive environment. Working with more than 600 regional and local partners, WEDC develops and delivers solutions representative of a highly responsive and coordinated economic development network. Visit [wedc.org](http://wedc.org) or follow WEDC on Twitter [@WEDCNews](https://twitter.com/WEDCNews) to learn more.