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Revitalization efforts help drive Ripon forward *WEDC leaders visit central Wisconsin city to see impact of multiple community projects*

RIPON, WI. APRIL 23, 2025 – Over the past decade, Ripon's 7,800 residents have seen buildings transformed for new uses, businesses expanded to accommodate growth, and public spaces upgraded to provide attractive public spaces. It's all led to an engaging downtown where people want to gather and businesses want to be located.

Now community leaders are looking to continue that momentum by launching a new fund to help small businesses cover their startup and expansion costs.

The city received a \$240,000 Small Business Development Grant (SBDG) from the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) to create the WRNC Business Opportunity Fund, a revolving loan fund to promote growth and sustainability of small businesses.

Ripon will collaborate with Waupun, North Fond du Lac, and Campbellsport to provide financial and technical support to help businesses with 25 or fewer employees startup, grow, expand, and/or create jobs. Businesses that receive funding will also work with Envision Greater Fond du Lac's Ignite Program, which will ensure their plans are viable and that they are connected to the resources they need to be successful, not only on launch day, but in the future.

"It's the relationships we've been establishing over the last four or five years," said Craig Tebon, executive director of Ripon Main Street, who notes the downtown vacancy rate is near zero. "Those have really made the downtown a healthier environment and better prospect for investment."

Local leaders are excited by the potential growth the new fund will unlock.

"If we can help a couple startups and a couple of expansions in the next year, I would be thrilled," Ripon City Administrator Adam Sonntag said. "Then the money comes back to create a sustainable pot of funds for the participating communities to draw from."

WEDC Secretary Missy Hughes and Deputy Secretary Sam Ridders were in Ripon Wednesday to see firsthand the progress that's been made in downtown and learn more about the city's plans for the SBDG funds. WEDC supported several downtown projects through Vibrant Spaces and Community Development Investment grants.

"Ripon understands the work that goes into revitalization efforts on downtowns but also has seen the impact those investments have," Hughes said. "It's exciting to hear about what they've done, but also how they want to make sure their downtown continues to thrive in the future."

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While in Ripon, Hughes and Ridders toured Ernessi Foods, a local hydroponic microgreens company that completed a \$1.2 million project to retrofit a vacant grocery store into an expanded location and space for a potential future retail outlet.

They also visited Knuth Brewing Company, which earned the Best Total Building Rehabilitation at the 34th Wisconsin Main Street Awards earlier this year for its \$1.5 renovation and that expanded brewing capacity and created a restaurant and event space.

Knuth Brewing has created a “vibrant event center in the heart of the community,” Tebon said. Wedding reservations have doubled from the previous year and that has brought more than 10,000 visitors to the community and boosted local tourism.

Knuth Brewing Company owners appreciate the assistance they received from the city and WEDC that allowed the business to thrive in Ripon.

“The support and loyalty we have received from Ripon and the surrounding communities, our loyal fans, and our great team has been a tremendous blessing for our business to continue to grow and we’re very grateful,” said David Knuth, owner of Knuth Brewing Company.

Hughes and Ridders also visited Village Green Park, which can now host larger events after the city used funds from a Vibrant Spaces Grant to install new lighting, seating, landscaping, and electrical upgrades.

“Revitalization and transformation don’t happen overnight,” Tebon said. “It shows you the value of sticking to something.”

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