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Making a lasting impression in Viroqua

WEDC Secretary visits planned Vibrant Spaces site, other downtown projects

VIROQUA, WI. MAY 8, 2025 – To stand out from other communities, Viroqua leaders knew they needed to focus their efforts on downtown to create a place that would stay with people long after they leave this city of about 4,500 residents in the heart of Wisconsin’s Driftless region.

“Downtowns draw people in and leave a lasting impression,” said Aaron Aslin, interim executive director of the Viroqua Chamber. “No one remembers where they parked, but they always remember how a place made them feel. That’s the power of a vibrant downtown—it turns a location into a destination.”

Through a series of renovation projects, Viroqua has turned itself into a downtown that leaves an impression on everyone who visits.

“Our downtowns are really the heart of our communities,” said Missy Hughes, secretary and CEO of the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation, the state’s lead economic development agency. “We want to create vibrant, thriving downtowns that draw people in and make them want to return. Viroqua’s doing a great job of that.”

Hughes was in Viroqua Thursday to see what steps the city has taken to make downtown memorable.

Viroqua was one of 27 communities in Wisconsin that received \$1.1 million in Vibrant Spaces Grants last month. The city received a \$24,956 grant and plans to use it to transform the public library’s courtyard and establish the Viroqua Mural Walk, a self-guided walking tour that highlights eight original murals in downtown.

Each mural will have a talking box or QR code tour participants can scan to listen or hear more about the mural’s history, what it represents, and the artist.

“The goal of the Viroqua Mural Walk is to shine a spotlight on the beautiful murals located in downtown Viroqua,” said Trina Erickson, director of the McIntosh Memorial Library and public information officer for the City of Viroqua. “The walk will become a signature tourist attraction for the community year-round and be a catalyst for economic development in the city.”

The city has also focused on supporting businesses to rehabilitate or adaptively reuse buildings in downtown. WEDC has assisted with several of these projects through Community Development Investment Grants.

LOOK FORWARD ►

With financial assistance from WEDC and the city, owners of the historic Hotel Fortney revitalized the building into a 14-room boutique hotel with first-floor retail tenants. The old Viroqua Bath House, a Works Progress Association (WPA) project and local historic landmark is being restored and adaptively reused to serve as a Viroqua Welcome Center and home for the Viroqua Chamber. And at the south end of downtown, a former auto and tire shop building is being converted into a tasting room, café, and production space for Round River Distillery.

"Hotel Fortney, the Welcome Center, and Round River Distillery are all excellent examples of restoring dilapidated, run-down buildings into strong components of the downtown environment," said Nate Torres, Viroqua city administrator. "These three properties have, or will be, transformed from liabilities to strong community assets that greatly enhance the downtown experience, neighboring properties, and the city as a whole."

While in Viroqua, Hughes also heard from officials with Vernon County Economic Development & Marketing about how it plans to use the \$150,000 Small Business Development Grant funds from WEDC to establish the Elevate Vernon Program, which will provide technical assistance and grants for small business owners.

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