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Creating 'a ripple effect' in Mauston

WEDC Secretary's visit focuses on multiple community projects in western Wisconsin

MAUSTON, WI. May 8, 2025 – Creating 'a ripple effect' in Mauston
WEDC Secretary's visit focuses on multiple community projects in western Wisconsin

While the popular saying is, "If you build it, they will come," in Mauston it's more like, "If you renovate it, they will come."

In recent years, the western Wisconsin city in Juneau County has focused on finding ways to renovate, rehabilitate, and refurbish vacant buildings in an effort to bring businesses, visitors, and new residents to the city.

"When stores plant roots in an area, they create a ripple effect," said Daron Haugh, Mauston city administrator. "As an area becomes known as a shopping destination, housing developers take notice. They see the growing commercial activity and start building new homes and apartments. Office buildings follow. What started as a single store transforms into a thriving mixed-use district."

Five vacant buildings in Mauston have found new life as local businesses, bringing fresh energy to downtown. Three of the transformations have happened in the past five years, Haugh said.

Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) Secretary Missy Hughes was in Mauston Thursday to see the progress that's being made in the city of 4,300 residents. WEDC has assisted with the transformation of several buildings and lots through Idle Sites, Community Development Investment, and Vibrant Spaces grants.

"It's exciting to see how Mauston has repurposed unused buildings and turned them into businesses that bring people to the community," Hughes said. "Projects like this are what turn communities into places where people want to gather, socialize, and call home."

This includes a \$28,255 Vibrant Spaces Grant to assist turning an unused lot into a "fully realized urban oasis." The State Street Lounge will be a shared public space that will include expanded seating, handicap accessible features, and additional amenities to create a welcoming area.

"This project will be a valuable community asset because it takes an underutilized space in our downtown and turns it into an engaging gathering place that enhances our city's quality of life," Haugh said. "We're creating a space where neighbors can connect, people can relax, and our downtown can become more vibrant and welcoming for everyone."

LOOK FORWARD ➤

Drawing people into Mauston is what Gravity Box Brewing Company did when it renovated a historic downtown property, one of the largest vacant properties in Mauston, into a brewhouse in 2021. In addition to craft drinks, Gravity Box Brewing offers light food and hosts show, including comedy and murder mystery, throughout the year.

The project used all local tradesmen and turned into a downtown destination for visitors and residents alike.

A once shuttered former K-Mart building is now the home of Jay's of Mauston, a powersports and marine center.

The building had been vacant since 2019 when K-Mart closed its retail stores. Jay Mittelstaedt, owner of Jay's of Mauston, purchased the 68,000-square-foot building and two adjacent properties in 2024. With the assistance of an Idle Sites Grant from WEDC, Mittelstaedt completed the renovations and expansion of the building to house the power sports, agriculture and turf, and marine divisions of Jay's of Mauston.

"Both Jay's of Mauston and the Gravity Box Brewing Company are not only job providers, but also creating economic impacts to our community," Haugh said. "When we have destination locations for people to shop and visit, other businesses are positively impacted too. That in turn will help drive our economy to reinvest within our infrastructure to grow that much larger."

During the visit, Hughes also learned about how Juneau County Economic Development Corporation (JCEDC) will use \$250,000 in Small Business Development Grant funds to provide grants to support small businesses and entrepreneurs in the county.

"Small businesses and entrepreneurial endeavors are the backbone of our nation's economy," said Tamaya Jo Loewe, executive director of JCEDC. "This opportunity is vitally important for small businesses, especially in rural Wisconsin, where inflation has outpaced population growth and density. Relative rates of many fixed business costs, such as electricity, logistics, or internet, are higher because they simply cost more for providers to offer these services rurally."

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