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Ashland leans on legacy and a shared community vision *WEDC Secretary's visit spotlights a historic downtown transformation*

ASHLAND, WI. JUNE 10, 2025 – In Ashland, history and community growth share the same address. A century-old bank building is now a bustling boutique and event space, and local leaders are working to reimagine what's next. The community is confronting future plans for Ashland's downtown with vision, resilience, and a shared commitment to shaping the future.

"Ashland's downtown economic strategy focuses on retention, revitalization, and recruitment, which involves a commitment to supporting existing businesses, enhancing the downtown experience, and attracting new entrepreneurs," said Mary McPhetridge, executive director of the Ashland Area Chamber of Commerce. "Small businesses are central to this mission and to ensuring a vibrant and resilient local economy."

Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) Secretary and CEO Missy Hughes and other WEDC leaders are visiting communities throughout Wisconsin this year to celebrate their success in building an Economy for All, by creating communities where everyone has the opportunity to thrive.

Hughes was in Ashland Tuesday to learn how local leaders are showcasing innovative downtown redevelopment efforts and facilitating ongoing conversations about the community's economic future.

"Communities like Ashland show us what it means to lead with creativity, collaboration, and community-focused vision, all of which are vital to revitalizing downtowns across the state," Hughes said. "By investing in the places that make the city unique, Ashland is preserving its character while creating new opportunities for growth and connection."

One example of that investment is The Union Boutique and The Union, a wedding venue. Both are located in a former Union Bank building that sat vacant in Ashland's downtown corridor for over 30 years. With support from a \$125,000 Community Development Investment grant from WEDC in 2022, developer and owner Jeanne Aspenson partnered with the City of Ashland to breathe new life into the historic building.

The project included a full renovation of the building's second floor into a wedding and event venue, a bar and lounge in the original bank vault, and short-term rental units for out-of-town guests. Community support for the boutique and venue has been strong, with Aspenson eventually acquiring the building due to the business's growth.

The city also contributed \$50,000 in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds and helped manage the grant process, showcasing another example of the collaborative investment celebrated in Ashland.

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Ashland's Mayor Debra Lewis praised the project for helping to boost foot traffic, supporting local contractors, and honoring the building's historical and architectural legacy through the State and National Registers of Historic Places.

"Downtown events and businesses drive consistent foot traffic and visitors to local retailers, while Ashland's other government, professional, and medical services provide a steady customer base as well," McPhetridge said.

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