

Rural Voices for Prosperity:

A Report of the
Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission on Rural Prosperity



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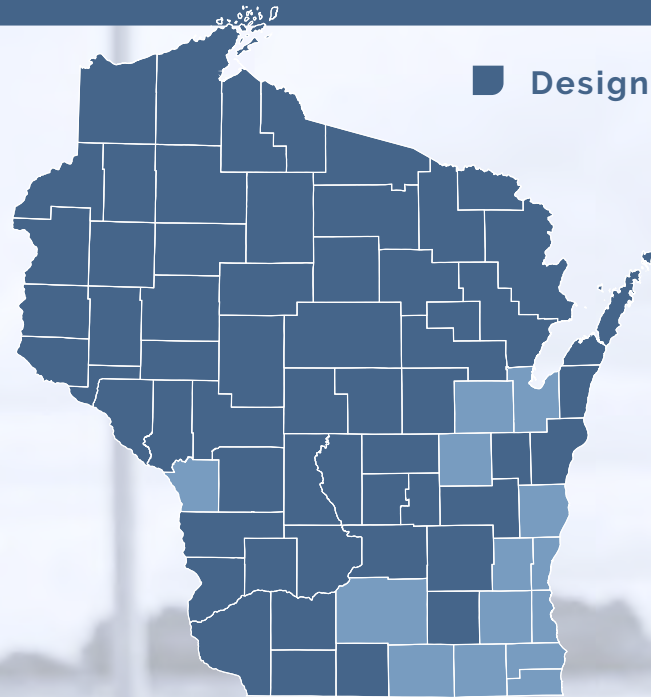
**WISCONSIN ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION**

Community 
Strategies Group

 THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

Introduction

Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission on Rural Prosperity



■ Designated Rural Counties

On Jan. 22, 2020, Governor Tony Evers announced the creation of the **Blue Ribbon Commission on Rural Prosperity** ("the Commission") during his 2020 State of the State Address. The following day, the Governor signed Executive Order #65, which charged the commissioners with gathering public input on current and future challenges in rural Wisconsin and submitting a plan to the Governor on how to invigorate rural communities and businesses.

Along with the Commission, Governor Evers announced a new Office of Rural Prosperity. Housed at the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC), the Office of Rural Prosperity seeks to foster vibrant, prosperous and resilient rural communities across Wisconsin. The Office provides a one-stop shop to help rural stakeholders navigate programs and resources serving rural communities and businesses.

The Office of Rural Prosperity has worked with the Governor's Office to coordinate the Commission's work in 2020. The Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group was brought on as a consultant to assist with planning and facilitating the activities of the Commission.

On June 8, Governor Evers announced his appointments to the Commission. The commissioners reflect the makeup of a rural Wisconsin community—a teacher, a banker, a high school student, farmers, and other community members—all representing different regions of the state.

The commissioners began their work amidst the COVID-19 health crisis, the resulting economic crisis, the climate crisis, and calls for racial equity. Due to the pandemic, the commissioners have yet to meet in person and conducted all meetings and public forums virtually.

The Commission held three virtual public forums, called "Conversations with the Commissioners", on Aug. 31, Sept. 8, and Sept. 16, 2020 that were collectively attended by over 500 participants. Every virtual public forum offered Hmong and Spanish interpretation and featured one state leader speaker and three rural voices who shared a story from their community. This was followed by small-group conversations in virtual breakout rooms that were facilitated by the commissioners. These virtual public forums were a state government-wide effort; state agency partners helped to conduct outreach and volunteered their time to make sure the virtual public forums ran smoothly. Additionally, the Commission invited members of the public to submit comments and ideas between Aug. 31 and Sept. 31.

The Commission received 45 written submissions from individuals and groups across the state. The Commission also welcomed invitations from organizations, businesses and other stakeholders for one or multiple commission members to join virtual meetings with their representatives. The commissioners collectively joined 25 stakeholder meetings in September and October 2020.

This report reflects the entirety of these conversations between the Commission and rural stakeholders providing recommendations from the commissioners; these are big picture steps that the commissioners involved believe are critical to advancing rural prosperity in Wisconsin. The "Findings" are the result of rural stakeholders input to the Commission, including challenges that are stifling rural prosperity and opportunities to address those challenges. The ideas from rural stakeholders that are highlighted within the "Findings" require and deserve further exploration. The commissioners understand that this is just the beginning of an important conversation and look forward to a sustained, inclusive dialogue with rural Wisconsinites.

Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission on Rural Prosperity



Commissioners

Bob Atwell, President and CEO, Nicolet National Bank, Green Bay
Thelma Heidel Baker, Owner, Bossie Cow Farm, Random Lake
Brittany Beyer, Executive director, Grow North, Rhinelander
Pamela Boivin, Executive director and loan officer, NiiJii Capital Partners, Inc. (NiiCaP), Keshena
David Falk, General manager, ND Paper, Biron
Tom Landgraf, Principal, Dimension Development, LLC, Madison
Rachel Sauvola, Agriscience teacher, New Richmond High School, New Richmond
Lauren Thompson, Co-president, Wisconsin 4-H Leadership Council, Woodville
Gina Tomlinson, CEO, Cochrane Co-op Telephone Company, Cochrane
Susan Townsley, Clinical social worker, Stonehouse Counseling, Viroqua
Jeff Tucker, Vice president of business development and care innovation, Marshfield Clinic, Eau Claire
Cheu Vang, Owner, Vang C&C Farms, Jefferson

Acknowledgements

The commission would like to thank the following individuals and groups for their partnership:

- The Governor’s Office
- The Lieutenant Governor’s Office
- State Agency Partners
- The Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Council, Inc.
- Melissa Hughes, Secretary and Chief Executive Officer, WEDC
- Sam Ridders, Deputy Secretary and Chief Operating Officer, WEDC
- Kelliann Blazek, Director, Office of Rural Prosperity, WEDC
- Sarah Bownds, Senior Events and Exhibits Manager, WEDC
- Lew Blank, intern, Office of Rural Prosperity, WEDC
- Janet Topolsky, Executive Director, Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group
- Katharine Ferguson, Associate Director, Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group
- Tyler Bowders, Administrative and Logistics Coordinator, Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group

The commission also thanks the following individuals for sharing their stories during the commission’s virtual public forums and meetings:

- Governor Tony Evers
- Lieutenant Governor Mandela Barnes
- Shannon Holsey, President, Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohican Indians
- Randy Romanski, Secretary-designee, Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection
- Joaquin Altoro, Chief Executice Officer, Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority
- Rebecca Cameron Valcq, Chairperson, Public Service Commission of Wisconsin
- Dr. Ephraim Nikoi, Associate professor, University of Wisconsin-Superior
- Terry Matier, Executive Director, Big Top Chautauqua
- Peter Kilde, Executive Director, West CAP
- Corrine Hendrickson, Owner, Corrine’s Little Explorers
- Dennis Beale, Owner and Chief Executive Officer, Power of Perception, LLC
- Jon Jarosh, Director of Communications and Public Relations, Door County Visitor Bureau
- Sheila Weix, Director of Substance Abuse Services—Alcohol & Drug Recovery Centers, Family Health Center of Marshfield
- Adrian Miller, President, Menominee Tribal Enterprises
- Terry Whipple, Executive Director, Juneau County Economic Development Corporation

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Recommendations from the Commission

- 1 Create and appropriately resource a place within the Wisconsin state government that understands and champions the unique attributes of rural Wisconsin—including Native Nations.** The state must have a branch that rural people and communities trust, that understands the different challenges rural places face and stewards the tremendous contribution rural regions and Native Nations make to Wisconsin. The Office of Rural Prosperity is well-poised to lead this work.
- 2 Continue the governor's efforts to make the needs and priorities of rural communities and Native Nations a forethought, rather than an afterthought.** Rural and tribal communities' needs should be considered in the design and implementation of state programs. There should be a government-wide commitment to apply an eye towards how well existing and new programs work or will work in rural regions. Beyond the simple yes or no question of whether a program does right by rural, consider: What would it take for this [policy/program/regulation/process] to improve outcomes in rural communities and Native Nations just as well as it does in more densely-populated communities?
- 3 Take an "all-of-government approach" to doing right by rural and tribal communities.** Charge the Office of Rural Prosperity with coordinating an enterprise-wide effort focused on rural and tribal community affairs and making the state's programs and policies more accessible and "rural forward." Ensure all state agencies as well as the governor's staff are involved in this effort.
- 4 Ensure rural places and Native Nations in rural Wisconsin get a fair shake in accessing state and federal resources.** Examples of creative, responsive solutions might include rural-specific program set-asides; strengthening regional councils and regional capacity to collaborate; help with writing applications for grants, loans and other assistance; and direct technical assistance to communities, counties and Native Nations.
- 5 Look beyond Wisconsin's borders for good ideas.** Understand how other states across the country organize and prioritize their work in rural regions and with Native Nations. When model policies, programs or practices are realizing positive results for rural people, communities, institutions and firms in other rural regions, bring them—and adapt them—to Wisconsin. For example, the Wisconsin Office of Outdoor Recreation was inspired by efforts in other states and launched in 2019 to support the state's growing outdoor recreation industry.
- 6 Unleash the full power of communities to innovate and act by updating state laws that restrict local agency.** For example, rules that make it difficult or even prohibit communities from setting their own local tax rates or from providing broadband to residents should be revised. The state should be setting the floor, not the ceiling, for local governments in Wisconsin.
- 7 Reinvest in the Wisconsin Idea and the University of Wisconsin, its satellite campuses, and our state's network of community and technical colleges as unique and valuable assets.** The state should invest in UW-Madison's Division of Extension's (UW-Extension) county-based educators and partner with UW-Extension to help each region of Wisconsin understand its assets and work with the region to craft a development strategy that is specific to the region—thus creating a differentiated strategy for development that incorporates rural realities, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. Native Nations must be considered as equal partners in this work.
- 8 Rebalance state business incentives to ensure economic development prioritizes the assets of Wisconsin people, communities and businesses.** Help foster local and regional development strategies and implementation in rural Wisconsin and in the Native Nations within Wisconsin's borders. In practice, this means that tax incentives for business attraction would support development and expansion of existing businesses, entrepreneurship, Main Street revitalization, child care, broadband, transportation and other investments essential to creating strong, thriving communities. The special session on agriculture called by Governor Evers in early 2020 aimed to reinvigorate Wisconsin's agriculture industry by helping farmers reach new markets and diversify revenue.
- 9 Invest in vital ingredients for our better future.** Many challenges in rural communities have been exacerbated by COVID-19. Dedicate sufficient resources to ensure families, workers, institutions, communities and firms have the resources they need to boost resiliency and prosper. Essential components of an economic development strategy include affordable high-quality broadband, child care and housing, physical and mental health care, career pathways, family support, youth mentorship, transportation, food security, renewable energy systems, and education. To ensure young and new people want to make rural Wisconsin their home, implement a strategy that includes support for the arts, broadband expansion, and the work of building inclusive, welcoming communities where everyone belongs, lives with dignity and thrives.
- 10 Continue the work of the Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission on Rural Prosperity.** COVID-19 fundamentally changed the timeline and nature of the work of this Commission, and much more good work could be done. The state should continue to listen to the people in the communities and Native Nations of rural Wisconsin. They have a clear-eyed view of their communities' assets, priorities and needs—and experience and ideas that can best inform how the state can help or hinder progress. The commissioners would be honored to help. Potential efforts in 2021 could include learning more about and helping the state act on the promising ideas in this report; holding a series of public meetings to gather a wider range input, ensuring the breadth of rural Wisconsin's voices have been heard; and updating and deepening our recommendations for how the state can help to advance prosperity in rural Wisconsin.

Commissioners



Rachel Sauvola

“Growing up on a dairy farm in rural Wisconsin, I have an allegiance to the people who provide three square meals for us each day. I knew early on that I wanted to maintain

my link to rural life by teaching others of all ages where their food comes from, so I pursued a degree in Agriculture Education. I am committed to continuing the hard work of those in rural Wisconsin through my daily classroom lessons and operating the SOAR Educational Center (our school farm) alongside my students. Thank you for engaging in our discussions, sharing your ideas and being willing to develop solutions to areas that need some work as our combined efforts assist in furthering the prosperity of this great state.

Susan Townsley

“I joined the commission hoping we would be able to work together to move resources upstream toward prevention in order to protect our most vulnerable rural

citizens. I was grateful to hear this concern echoed in our listening sessions. I heard a desire by our rural citizens to link arms with each other so that we can work together to prevent childhood trauma, homelessness, food insecurity and adverse health outcomes. I heard a deep understanding that if we all come together to help those in need, we all prosper. I am hopeful that we will be able to move the recommendations in this report forward, especially as it relates to the care of our children who are the future of our rural areas and our State.



Brittany Beyer

“I’m the director of a regional economic development corporation that represents a region that is almost 100% rural, so many of the stories that the Blue Ribbon

Commission heard are stories I hear every day from my region. But this report goes beyond that. The facilitator’s ability to lift up what our rural communities have done is essential to figuring out a pathway forward. Not everything needs to be fixed, but what needs to be adjusted so often shares commonality in many communities, which tells me there needs to be a system-level readjustment. I am impressed with what this report brings forth, and with attention put in the right places we can find prosperity in so many of our treasured communities.

Dave Falk

“It has been an honor to serve on the Commission and listen to the residents of rural Wisconsin tell us what their communities need to prosper. The passion that the

participants of our listening sessions have for their communities was evident during every session. They love the quality of life offered by their communities but are acutely aware of the economic challenges that keep them from thriving. While our rural communities are very diverse spanning all four corners of the state, there were many common areas of concern that were raised during the sessions. These common concerns are highlighted in the Commission’s report along with ideas to explore to address them. It is vital that our rural communities thrive and as a member of this commission I am committed to help support that endeavor.



Jeffrey Tucker

“When Governor Evers announced the formation of his Blue Ribbon Commission on Rural Prosperity in early 2020 – I was very interested! As a rural resident, and someone who works primarily

in rural communities in my role at Marshfield Clinic Health System, I feel very strongly about the success and future of rural Wisconsin. When I received the call from WEDC that I was being considered as a commissioner, and then was selected, it’s hard to express how excited I was to be a part of this. It has truly been an honor to listen to – and represent – rural Wisconsin residents from all over this great State. I truly believe our work will help our state leadership develop a plan for the prosperity and sustainability of rural Wisconsin for generations to come.

Gina Tomlinson

“It has been an honor to serve rural Wisconsin as a commissioner. Wisconsinites took this opportunity to come forward and share their rural communities’ challenges and concerns. It is my hope and dream that this report will help rural Wisconsin move forward to not only to survive but thrive.



Lauren Thompson

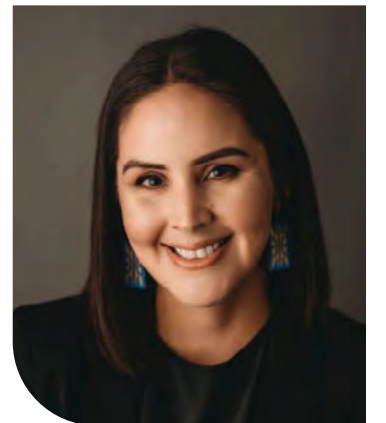
“As a youth member of this Commission, I have found our time together to be a phenomenal learning experience and I am humbled to have been given this opportunity. Rural communities

and agriculture have a special place in my heart and I’m overjoyed that the voices of citizens from every corner of Wisconsin are being heard. I look forward to witnessing the positive impact the Commission has on rural Wisconsin in the future.

Pamela Boivin

“I absolutely love and appreciate the diversity of our rural communities. They can set the tone for a whole region with just as big of an impact on our economies as our urban counter parts.

As a Menominee tribal member, I am proud to have been a part of this process to give our communities the platform to showcase those values of our rural communities along with their unique assets.



Commissioners



**Thelma
Heidel-Baker**

“Rural Wisconsin has so much to offer, from the wonderful farm diversity to amazing natural resources, and so much more. After returning to rural Wisconsin with my

own family after many years away, I appreciate even more what our rural countryside has to offer. Being a part of the Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission is my small way of helping provide a continued place in Wisconsin for small family farms like ours and a reason for future generations to return to rural Wisconsin.



**Cheu
Vang**

“As a member of different communities--Hmong, farming, a local in Jefferson--I have observed that there are many issues we are facing right now.

Examples are, health issues (covid-19), lack of internet access for residents, tools for virtual learning, unemployment in rural areas and affordable housing. I see that there is a lack of knowledge regarding the many programs available to assist those in need amongst our communities. I would like to see the state address this by hiring people from those communities to educate and socialize these programs. Thank you for allowing me to be a member of the Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission on Rural Prosperity.

**Bob
Atwell**

“The Commission has taken significant steps toward discerning the obstacles and opportunities on the way toward a more sustainable and prosperous rural environment. Wisconsin's beautiful hills, valleys, fields, lakes and woodlands have always offered a rich bounty for our people. It has never been easy and yet more hard work lies ahead.



**Tom
Landgraf**

“97% of Wisconsin's land is considered “rural”, with 27% of our population proudly calling that land “home”. The reader of this report will gain insight into the unique and significant issues facing rural Wisconsin residents. The reader will also get a glimpse at strategies to enhance rural economic and community development, education, health systems, housing, technology, innovation, and agriculture. A must read for all Wisconsinites!



Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission on Rural Prosperity

December 14, 2020

Dear Fellow Wisconsinites:

It has been an honor and privilege to serve you on the Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission on Rural Prosperity. Each of us as commissioners were called to serve based on our life experiences entrenched in rural communities across our great state. Representing a variety of occupations, we know, understand, and celebrate the diversity within Wisconsin. We are motivated to make necessary recommendations to ensure that Wisconsin continues to be known for its successful rural pursuits, therefore encouraging our people and communities to continue to grow, thrive and, survive whatever life may throw our way.

We understand that Wisconsin has many layers of complexities and government. Here, in Wisconsin, we have 72 counties that, combined, contain 1,852 cities, villages and townships. Every resident of Wisconsin cares about this place they call home. As commissioners, we knew we would hear from a variety of folks who recognize that living and governing in larger, urban areas differs significantly from small, rural areas. We listened carefully for those differences, by identifying the strengths, opportunities, and challenges presented by regulatory, economic and legislative issues and experiences from across the state.

We are committed to supporting you, as we have been throughout this process, and we are committed to listening, despite facing a pandemic and a lack of in-person meetings and gatherings. We have held three virtual public listening sessions and met with a range of stakeholder groups to gather information and hear more about the things you love and adore about rural life. We have heard about your challenges and the things you aspire to change about living in rural communities. We know that to increase prosperity for all, some concrete needs must be addressed. Rest assured that we have heard you! We know and understand that in order to prosper in rural places both small and large, we must continue to ask questions, seek answers, and engage those who are ready and willing to do the work - the hard work - that it will take to make change a reality.

Our commitment to the very thing Wisconsin is known for has allowed us to meet some of the most genuine and passionate individuals who work hard day in and day out to create success in their communities. We heard your celebrations. We heard your heart wrenching stories about things that must change for equality across the state. We poured over your testimonies to observe commonalities and differences. We generated a list of recommendations based on our findings that we truly believe represent all of us.

As commissioners, you inspired us, you shared from your heart. You brought forth ideas that are workable solutions to some of the largest challenges we face together. You reminded us about the things that are going well for rural communities. You gave us perspective to broaden our own life experiences. You showed us examples of engaging youth where you live. You ensured that we had what we needed to better understand what your life is like, what your community needs and what we can all do together to make a difference. You truly included everyone in your community when you described your needs so that we could better understand the situations you faced. By telling your stories, you breathed optimism into us and showed us that, although it will take time and hard work, we can and will work together to ensure that rural Wisconsin prospers for many generations to come.

Sincerely,

*Rachel Sauvola, Jeff Tucker, Susan Townsley, Gina Tomlinson, Brittany Beyer, Lauren Thompson, David Falk, Pamela Boivin,
Thelma Heidel Baker, Cheu Vang, Bob Atwell and Tom Landgraf*

December 14, 2020

Wisconsin's quality of life and the character of its people are deeply rooted in the land and natural resources that help define the rural experience so treasured by Wisconsinites and visitors to our state. Like any asset of value, Wisconsin's rural communities require preservation, cultivation and investment. Governor Tony Evers had precisely this goal in mind when he created the Office of Rural Prosperity, opening the door for state programs and resources tailored to rural communities, businesses and workers, housed within the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC).

Of course, effectively serving rural stakeholders requires a full understanding of their unique challenges, as well as a healthy respect for the local insights, networks and resources available to both identify and implement solutions. All of which I witnessed as Chief Mission Officer for Organic Valley, where my role involved making sure the voices of 2,000 farmers across the nation were heard. In Viroqua, the Driftless Area town that I call home, we've seen how a robust local economy has an incredible multiplier effect throughout the community. I bring to my leadership position at WEDC a strong commitment to rural Wisconsin and its "kitchen table" approach to problem-solving, as reflected in this report from the Blue Ribbon Commission on Rural Prosperity.

Through three public virtual input sessions attended by more than 500 participants, 25 meetings with rural stakeholder groups and 45 written public comments, we learned about the long-standing and emerging challenges facing rural Wisconsin communities. Many of these challenges have been exacerbated by COVID-19, from contracting agricultural markets to population decline, skilled workforce shortages, housing issues and broadband deficiencies. While reflective and at times sobering, these discussions were also inspiring, both for the wide-ranging and diverse participation they attracted and for the ideas they generated. Within almost every Wisconsin town there is a "secret sauce" of leaders, doers and champions combined with the assets of the area that, if unlocked, will lead to prosperity not only for that community, but for our state as a whole.

This report lays the groundwork for a sustained strategy aimed at building and maintaining prosperity across rural Wisconsin. It is the beginning of a process reflecting new urgency toward creating an economy that works for everyone, in every corner of this great state.

I look forward with your help to continuing the work necessary to bring this vision of a prosperous rural Wisconsin to life.

Sincerely,



Missy L. Hughes
Secretary and Chief Executive Officer



Chequamegon-Nicolet Forest— Bagley Rapids, Mountain in Oconto County

How is Wisconsin organizing to make rural progress?

RURAL LEADERSHIP

Rural communities rely on local leaders, many whom are volunteers, to steer and advance community efforts. For centuries now, people have pitched in to do the job of keeping their communities whole and making their communities better. Today, one unifying theme characterizes rural stakeholders' comments to commissioners: **rural Wisconsin finds it challenging to recruit and maintain the well-informed, committed, creative local leadership critical to local and statewide prosperity.** Rural stakeholders told the commissioners:

Frequent leadership turnover in elected, paid and volunteer positions is impeding progress. Many stakeholders report concern in their community over too-frequent turnover in key leadership positions, whether elected officials, hired town managers or community "sparkplug" volunteer leaders. The learning curve for new leaders is very steep. Frequent turnover or a vacancy in a key position makes it difficult to gain traction on important issues. Staff changes in key positions, such as a local economic development director, can stymie progress even if elected leaders and boards put forth clear platforms about what must be done.

Lack of turnover can have the same effect. Other rural stakeholders expressed deep concern about the *lack* of turnover in leadership over time, and the lack of change in who is considered capable of or invited into leadership. In places where the same leadership has been entrenched for 20 to 30 years or more, it can be hard to adapt to new challenges, new tools and ideas, new understandings of "who lives here" and how they are doing, and to implement new, more effective practices and programs. With no turnover, young and emerging leaders can feel stifled when they are neither invited nor welcomed to serve. This can cause young adults to take their energy and talents elsewhere rather than change their own communities. Rural areas with a leadership profile that lacks diversity can alienate those on the margins, depress participation and hurt community cohesiveness.

It is hard to find the people to serve in leadership positions. Rural communities, simply because of population size, need a comparatively larger share of their community members to step up to the plate and fill leadership roles than do urban places. A county with a million residents needs the same number of commissioners as one with 20,000, and the same holds true for the typical range of offices and civic organizations. As a result, rural places dig deeper in their talent pools to fill all the necessary roles. The number of rural "doers" who have the time or energy to help and serve is more constrained than in the past when taking into account the aging population of Wisconsin's rural areas, today's need for two income earners to support a family and the demands on families with young children. That can result in "the same 10 people doing everything." In some rural communities, key positions sit open and unfilled. In places where leadership has been entrenched for decades, it is hard to convince younger, emerging and more diverse leaders that they are welcome to serve, even when their help is desperately needed.

It takes a lot to lead. Anyone who has served on a town council or a drain commission, or who has led the volunteer effort to run the annual 10K or art fair, can voice some version of: "If I knew then what I know now, I might never have done it." Besides the time and energy, rural leaders—especially elected leaders, many of whom are volunteers working other full-time jobs—may have to learn the ins and outs of a dizzying host of laws and regulations, development finance, fundraising, complex scheduling, insurance and liability issues, computer and administrative systems, human resources, project management—the whole gamut. In short, volunteers in many cases must learn the "job" on the job. And other than through the goodwill and mentorship of prior leaders, not much training is available for the individuals our rural communities rely on most to make a difference. Stakeholders regretted budget cuts to **University of Wisconsin-Madison's Division of Extension (UW-Extension)** that reduced staff capacity for local government training. Local government organizations such as the Wisconsin Towns Association, Wisconsin Counties

"We need to educate local leaders on how to be leaders."
Shawano County Resident



Omro, Farm to Table Event

Association and the League of Wisconsin Municipalities were cited as key resources and sources of information sharing in rural communities.

Political clashes stifle community action and discourage new leaders from becoming involved. Rural stakeholders report feeling that the current political climate, now long afflicted by bitter partisanship, is dissuading talented people from taking part in meaningful community work, much less leading it. Others expressed frustration with state officials looking for investments that advance their careers rather than on things that local communities know are important to their community's future. Even so, some stakeholders called out their state legislators as particularly helpful at sharing information, especially during the COVID-19 crisis.

Ideas to explore: rural leadership

Rural stakeholders suggested to the Commission:

- **Strengthen leadership training to build capacity across rural Wisconsin.** Stakeholders call again to increase support for UW-Extension for its work across the state's 72 counties. In this case, specifically to boost efforts to train local leaders on a regular cycle and to support current rural leaders in providing mentorship to new rural leaders. The state could also reach out to Wisconsin philanthropic organizations to help recruit, inform and train rural leaders. Consider statewide programs such as the Community Leadership Program and the Reservation Leadership Program supported by the Blandin Foundation² in Minnesota or the Ford Institute for Community Building hosted by Oregon's Ford Family Foundation² as models for how philanthropic foundations can develop a talented pool of leaders qualified and willing to step up across the range of community and reservation leadership roles. Likewise, the Bush Foundation has designed a leadership training model that inspires, connects and equips a cohort of local leaders from three states to become more effective local leaders, while providing them with stipends that allow them to participate.³ The state could also track a current national effort, RuraLead,⁴ that is exploring what qualities and practices are critical to strengthening rural leadership.
- **Elevate and share success stories from rural communities.** Stakeholders expressed an interest in learning more about what's working in other regions of the state and who is working on those projects. Explore new ways to share successful projects, ideas and initiatives so that rural leaders can learn from each other and don't have to reinvent the wheel.
- **Support rural youth leadership development and multigenerational learning and leading.** The Wisconsin 4-H Leadership Council provides an opportunity for adults and youth to lead together and learn from each other. Local and state groups should seek out rural youth participation to provide new opportunities for community engagement.

STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE AND FINANCE

No matter what topic was being discussed, rural stakeholders raised the same pivotal issue with the commissioners: **give rural communities the flexibility to determine and to support their essential services.** Rural stakeholders told the commissioners:

State-imposed county and municipal levy limits are not fair, and they are holding rural communities back. Wisconsin law imposes limits on the amount that local governments can raise through property tax levies, using a formula based on the community's net new construction— the amount of local new construction minus any demolition or destruction of buildings. Rural stakeholders point to multiple reasons for why they think this is truly limiting the flexibility for rural jurisdictions, preventing communities from doing what needs to be done to improve the quality of life in and prospects for people in their areas. First, communities restricted from any new levies cannot raise funds for critical investments in physical infrastructure —and it may be that the very places restricted by the formula are the ones most in need of that investment. Failing sewer and water systems cannot be repaired or replaced unless the community can help generate the revenue to pay for it. Second, it forces tough choices that affect community quality of life and economic development. When communities are forced to choose between fixing streets and providing EMTs, quality of life suffers for every resident and companies are less willing to open or grow businesses there. Third, although the rule makes exceptions for essential services, critical emergency services like fire departments and EMTs are not classified as essential, so local units of government have no way to generate the resources to sustain them as costs increase. Finally, they disenfranchise local individuals from their right to decide what services are best for their community. Overall, county and municipal levy limits cripple the ability of communities to maintain existing infrastructure and services, respond to new challenges brought on by unanticipated developments like COVID-19 and meet the demands of their people.

There is little incentive for local units of government to find creative ways to reduce costs or consolidate services. In some cases, state law requires local municipalities that find a way to reduce cost through consolidating services to then reduce their tax levy. That has the effect of locking in inefficient and more costly practices. Innovative and collaborative approaches that provide better service at lower cost should be incentivized, not penalized.

Rural communities are rolling up their sleeves to do more. They just want help. This situation has not stopped rural communities from striving and trying. As one stakeholder put it: "I want to mention things I've seen local governments try to do in the state. They are willing to be conveners and point out when they don't have the tools to address an issue. They are eager and have desire but are not sitting around. They are instead saying, 'Let's get village boards and the board of supervisors and improvement groups involved.' They are trying to figure out ways to address things, but the state has regulations." Multiple rural stakeholders said, "it takes resources to get resources." For example, Tax Incremental Districts (TID) are underutilized in rural communities because oftentimes towns do not have the staff capacity to pursue a TID. UniverCity Year, a 3-year partnership between UW-Madison and Wisconsin communities, was cited as a successful program that is funneling technical assistance resources to rural communities.

COVID-19 has driven—or may drive—many rural communities to the point of fiscal crisis. Similar to much of the country, many of Wisconsin's financially stressed rural communities have put planning on the backburner, which is now coupled with having to respond to a pandemic. Few rural communities have a plan in place for how to pull through a crisis like COVID-19. One stakeholder summed this: "The impending crisis, with its resulting municipal revenue loss, will impact all of the other things we've been talking about for the future." Indeed, rural communities that have depleted their meager reserves during COVID-19 will have little choice, once they calculate lost tax revenue due to COVID-19, but to further cut services in order to balance their budgets.

Rural stakeholders are heartened by the renewed attention being paid to rural Wisconsin. Stakeholders were consistently eager to be heard by the Commission, and positive about the opportunity. Many characterize the creation of the Office of Rural Prosperity and the Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission as "a conduit for growth" in rural communities, an "exciting development" and "a big opportunity."

"I grew up in northwestern Wisconsin where, frankly, many did not view the state government as a partner or think Madison necessarily had our best interests at heart. I think this new Office of Rural Prosperity has the opportunity to create ownership for rural and Madison together."

Columbia County resident

Ideas to explore: state and local governance and finance

Rural stakeholders suggested to the Commission:

- **Support innovative and collaborative solutions that can improve services at equal or lower costs.** Revise state law so that communities are not penalized with reduced levies when they find ways to work together to reduce costs.
- **Increase state support for local and regional planning and COVID-19 recovery.** Rural communities seldom possess staff capacity to conduct comprehensive planning and have little or no resources to hire outside assistance. Without state support, communities lack updated plans to address changing conditions, emergencies or opportunities. Consider especially the services and community infrastructure most likely to suffer or be at risk over the longer-term COVID-19 recovery period, and partner with groups of communities, regions and tribes to maintain basic services for rural communities and their residents. Provide technical assistance to help communities access existing programs and tools, such as Tax Incremental Districts.
- **Support efforts to build local capacity.** Find new ways to partner with rural communities and tribes to increase readiness to apply for existing programs and support existing initiatives like the UniverCity Year partnership.
- **Change county and municipal levy limits.** Restore individuals' right to tax themselves for needs they deem critical for their own community. Examine alternatives to the net-new construction rule. Consider allowing communities to have discretionary authority over what services are essential based on their own needs.

REGIONAL EFFORT AND RURAL-URBAN CONNECTIONS

It's a growing trend across the nation and in Wisconsin. Rural stakeholders told commissioners: **rural communities are turning to collaborating, with each other and with urban neighbors and markets, to address collective challenges and opportunities.** Rural stakeholders told the Commission:

Urban and rural areas cannot prosper separately. They need each other. Rural and urban areas share water, as the saying goes. Urban areas rely on the rural countryside for healthy food, a clean water supply, pure air, lumber to build, raw materials and manufactured products, labor for industry, places to recreate, and a host of other needs. At the same time, rural places rely on urban markets for

their products and resources, jobs for commuters, visitors for tourism, specialized services like advanced health care, and many other necessities that cannot be sustained in smaller places. Rural, suburban and urban cores areas also share challenges like child poverty, low wages and housing affordability issues that bear more similarity than is commonly understood.⁵ Rural/urban partnerships can support the prosperity of both when the needs and conditions of all stakeholders are given equal weight in policy and program development.

Regional collaboration is on the upswing in rural Wisconsin. Across much of rural Wisconsin, Chambers of Commerce, towns, Tribal Nations, local economic development organizations, mission-focused groups and many others are increasingly reaching out to each other to address common interests.

Evidence for this is woven throughout what stakeholders told the Commission and are reflected in other parts of this report, from tribal child care collaboratives to regional arts and culture efforts to education/business/community workforce development initiatives, and more. Creative use of MOUs and other tools for collaboration is on the rise. Regional action is springing up by will, passion, common sense or necessity. Regional economic development organizations are playing a hub role for some of this activity.

Some state policy and regulations can impede regional enterprise. Sensible and cost-saving regional efforts are stopped in their tracks if they run into legal prohibitions. One stakeholder example illustrated this: "We wanted to set up a green, county-wide water-quality project, but we are in different watersheds, and there was something about a phosphorous trading system regulation that kept us from a county-wide strategy." The levy cap restrictions also present a disincentive for cross-community collaborations to more effectively deliver levy-supported services.

"I have noticed in the past few years the incredible regional partnerships in the area. The mentality is that we have to work together if we are going to be successful."

Price County resident

"Prior to COVID, communities realized they had some power when they were working together. Post COVID, the best thing we can do is to create some infrastructure for those communities so they can more easily come together around issues that matter to them."

Sauk County resident

Sometimes it takes incentives to help communities think beyond their borders—and structures to work across them. It is hard for communities that hold to their rock-solid, lifelong high school football and basketball rivalries to overcome traditions of local self-reliance that are also embedded in local and state policies and structures. One stakeholder offered: “There is difficulty with hard boundaries. Rural prosperity is spread across all those boundaries. Locals have employees and services that cross tax districts. It is hard to coordinate these pieces. It goes across local government lines.” Working across sectors and communities is tough work, and even though it often produces better results, collaboration typically takes time and money that the collaborating parties don’t anticipate at the front end. Places that have incentives and structures to facilitate collaboration have a leg up in this situation. For example, some government and philanthropic grant opportunities preference—via scoring or other means—project applications that involve cross-place or cross-issue collaborations. And across the country, rural regional non-profits of many types—including community action agencies, community foundations, technical colleges, community development financial institutions and more—have been stepping up to convene a region’s many players to take action on critical issues and assemble financial resources to invest in regional projects. This is critical because there is no “government of a region.”⁶

“Urban and rural have been connected forever. Eighty percent of whatever a farmer grows will go to an urban consumer. If we think in terms of watershed, foodshed and cultureshed, then we value both urban and rural parts of a region, and I think that is where our strength lies.

Jefferson County resident

Ideas to explore: regional effort and rural-urban connections

Rural stakeholders suggested to the Commission:

- **Create incentives to working regionally across place in state programs—and remove rules that thwart it.** Many state programs and regulations are designed for use by individual communities—or under that assumption. Instead, consider how small changes in wording, scoring mechanisms and incentives can make a huge difference in communities seeking to work together, and their ability and facility to do it. Explore how other states and places are deploying incentives and structures that foster regional solutions on pressing issues.⁷
- **Provide more support and guidance for existing statewide structures that can facilitate collaboration.** The State has assets in its support for and partnerships with the regional economic development organizations and UW-Extension. Help position and strengthen both as go-to resources that will help facilitate cross-place collaboration. Consider how to address funding challenges faced by regional efforts.



Downtown Danbury

POLICY DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Rural stakeholders were generous with their input, and bottom-lined many of their ideas and advice with this basic principle: **Building prosperity in rural Wisconsin requires powerfully engaging rural people in the design and in the solutions.** Rural stakeholders told the Commissioners:

Don’t design or implement policy and programs without rural participation in both. Rural stakeholders are asking legislators and state agencies to listen first, then propose legislation and write rules and regulations. Too often that happens the other way around. One stakeholder comment summed up what many offered: “Initiatives are spearheaded out of Madison and Milwaukee for rural people. Despite their best intentions, there is a disconnect. It’s like we are speaking two totally different languages.” Rural people tend to have close relationships with their local elected officials; they know them, run into them at the gas station and tell them what they think. Decisions made locally in rural communities without formal and informal community participation breed resentment, distrust and resistance. The same is likely in instances when state policy is developed without significant rural perspective, participation and thinking in the design mix. And stakeholders are clear that the engagement of rural communities must be an ongoing process, not a one-and-done task. Rural people have been through so many “public hearings” and “listening sessions” that seem like a check-the-box formality rather than a true attempt to engage with rural people and understand what will, and what will not, help them do the best for their place and people.

“We need to keep this question at forefront: Are rural people at the table when decisions are being made and being incorporated?”

Juneau County resident

Recognize that there is no “one rural.” All rural is not the same. While some issues and solutions crosscut most of rural Wisconsin, different regions, Tribal Nations and communities need to adopt or adapt different approaches, based on their economies, their place, their people and their conditions at the time. This underlines rural stakeholders’ call for flexibility and authority in determining their priorities, partners and ability to raise and use funds. It also calls for state programs to design more flexibility or waivers into programs to enable rural efforts to do what needs to be done.

Level entry into the field of play. Some state program opportunities are “non-starters” for rural. The first deterrent is broadband access: when program information is posted online and application also must be made online, rural areas that lack good connections are at a disadvantage. Second, jurisdictions and organizations in metro areas typically have larger (and better paid) staffs, with specialized expertise, whose whole job involves finding and applying for funding opportunities. That often cannot be matched by a rural or tribal community; thus, metro often “eats rural’s share of the funding pie.” Stakeholders cited Paycheck Protection Program funding as one example of how this recently played out with federal funding; the Small Business Administration did not issue guidance to lenders to prioritize rural markets, leaving rural businesses at a disadvantage.⁸

“I think we in state government could do a better job of breaking down our silos – which are great on farms, but not in government. We have programs in place; it’s just a matter of coordinating them in an efficient way that does the best good for the citizens of Wisconsin.

WisDOT staff member

Collaboration across state agencies can contribute much to rural prosperity. Effective rural solutions often require coordination and collaboration among different levels of government and across state agencies. Several departments may ask for the same data in applications and reports, but in different formats, wasting precious rural time and limited resources. Project funding must often be negotiated among several departments and units of government, and guidance about departmental authority and requirements that sometimes conflict is not always clear—even to state staffers themselves. Both rural stakeholders and agency staff who spoke with commissioners pointed to recent signs of agencies beginning to make connections that help rural communities. Many state agencies have field staff across the state that should connect and share information whenever possible.

The Office of Rural Prosperity and the Governor’s Blue Ribbon Commission are significant steps in the right direction. Rural stakeholders view the new Office of Rural Prosperity and the independence of the Blue Ribbon Commission as a real advantage, providing them credibility and hope that things will change for the better. Stakeholders also caution that neither will be enough unless followed up by sustained action.



Watertown

Ideas to explore: policy design principles

Rural stakeholders suggested to the Commission:

- **Incorporate rural participation in state policy and program design.** Involve rural stakeholders at every phase of program ideation, design and implementation to ensure programs work for rural Wisconsin.
- **Make sure programs work across the many faces and places of rural Wisconsin.** The Office of Rural Prosperity is a great start for ensuring there is a place in Wisconsin government that understands the similarities and differences between rural places and that can advise legislators and state agencies in drafting laws and regulations that make sense for all of Wisconsin. Continue and expand the role of the Office of Rural Prosperity to ensure that the programs and investments of the state work well across the diversity of rural Wisconsin's people and regions. Consider set-asides in funding programs to ensure that rural communities and Tribal Nations receive a fair share of resources.
- **Coordinate policy design and implementation across state agencies, keeping rural in mind.** Provide a one-stop point of access for accessing multiple state programs and services affecting rural and tribal issues, especially issues that require a complex mix of funding from various sources, like housing and economic development. Coordinate requirements of programs that are often used together to allow common applications and reporting requirements. Support the capacity of rural places to compete for resources by increasing resources available to region-focused organizations to provide technical and administrative support for communities and tribes.
- **Extend the life of the Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission on Rural Prosperity**

Places, culture and arts in Wisconsin

Rural Wisconsin communities are boosting and diversifying their local economy by creatively harnessing their distinctive culture, arts and places to attract visitors from near and far. Along the way, they're forging connections between rural and urban residents, Native Nations, and their neighbors. Here are some of the examples that rural stakeholders brought to the Commission's attention:

Braking for culture and agriculture in the Driftless Region. The Farm/Art DTour draws up to 25,000 rural and urban dwellers to southwest Wisconsin's Sauk County for a free, self-guided, 50-mile driving tour through scenic working farmland dotted with temporary art installations, live performances on open pastures, roadside poetry and more. The DTour is the main event of the annual fall Fermentation Fest, a nine-day introduction to "live culture" (pun intended!)—with hands-on classes and presentations on fermenting, hosted by the Wormfarm Institute, a local nonprofit working to integrate culture and agriculture via events and a farm-based artist residency.

Cultivating common ground from Sauk to Milwaukee. What began as bus tours that took visitors from Milwaukee to Sauk County and visitors from Sauk County to Milwaukee is growing into the Rural Urban Flow, also initiated by the Wormfarm Institute. The program is creating an ongoing network of artists, farmers and community leaders working across the rural-urban boundaries and exploring each other's landscapes.


Blending arts and charity in Arcadia. In western Wisconsin's Arcadia (population around 3,000), Ashley for the Arts is a three-day arts and music event held every August. With local sponsors, including Ashley Furniture Industries, the event offers affordable access to big-name, world-class musical acts, as well as an arts and crafts fair and family recreation activities. In addition to bringing in people from around the world, it has produced more than \$2.4 million in donations for regional nonprofits and area schools since it began in 2008.

The show will go on in Darlington. In southwest Wisconsin, the Lafayette County seat of Darlington (population around 2,300) hopes to soon entice locals and visitors to stop, shop, dine and be entertained when it transforms its long-abandoned opera house into The Driver Opera House Center for the Arts. Residents banded together to purchase the opera house, built in 1883 by Josephus Driver but shuttered in 1951. They are now funding its transformation into a visual and performing arts hub, with retail shops on the ground floor and cultural productions in the second-floor performance space—making it a revived cultural and commercial anchor for the Darlington downtown.



Ripon Summer Concert

Culture under canvas in Bayfield. A big dream became a big tent in Bayfield (population about 471) when musicians launched Lake Superior Big Top Chautauqua in 1986. Now a major summer attraction, the 900-seat music venue and performing arts center—under a canvas tent—offers original musical theater, touring artists and a National Public Radio show. Big Top Chautauqua's non-profit effort also collaborates on arts events and education with the nearby Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa. With a \$2 million annual budget, it has an \$8.5 million annual economic impact on the rural Bayfield region, providing jobs for performers, crew, caterers and beyond, as well as driving other tourism efforts.

A full-page photograph of two hikers sitting on the edge of a dark, craggy rock cliff. They are wearing helmets and bright jackets (one blue, one green). The sun is low on the horizon to the left, creating a warm, golden glow across the sky and reflecting on the calm water of Devil's Lake below. The background shows rolling hills and a forest. The overall mood is peaceful and scenic.

Many Wisconsin residents credit the “quality of life” as the reason they love rural living—whether they are permanent residents, second-home owners or seasonal tourists.

Devil's Lake is a place of natural wonder and legend.
The central feature of the biggest State Park in Wisconsin

~ Baraboo in Sauk County Wisconsin

How well are people connecting?

CONNECTING THROUGH ARTS AND CULTURE

Many Wisconsin residents credit the “quality of life” as the reason they love rural living—whether they are permanent residents, second-home owners or seasonal tourists. One component of that quality of life is the sense of “family” that connects people in rural places who band together and “do together” to make things happen for each other and the community. A second component is the creativity and craft that rural people apply to every aspect of life, from the design of a pie crust, to staging community theater productions at the town hall, to mounting public art displays and events from farms to Main Street. Rural stakeholders had a unifying message to commissioners: *small investments in arts and culture can leverage big dividends in the viability of rural economies and local prosperity*. Rural stakeholders told the commissioners:

Arts, culture and special “place” attributes attract and retain residents, helping to sustain community viability. From Door County to the Driftless Area, Bayfield to Darlington, or any of the unique places in between, the arts, culture and character of rural Wisconsin are critical to attracting new residents, supporting local economies and adding tax revenues into local and state coffers.

Arts and culture sustain and attract people and businesses that underpin local economies. Businesses want to locate—and grow—in places that are attractive for their owners, managers and workforce. Investing in the cultural attributes that attract business investments, in turn, attracts more businesses, creating a “virtuous cycle” which increases the viability of local economies for the people that live there.⁹ Artists themselves reside in rural Wisconsin, drawn there by the beauty and space; by encouraging arts and cultural activities, we also encourage their livelihoods, and draw more residents who are artists to Wisconsin, along with doctors and teachers. By undergirding the potential to attract businesses, makers and workers, arts and cultural activities provide direct economic benefits to Wisconsin communities, supporting over 96,000 jobs and adding more than \$10 billion to the Wisconsin economy in 2017.¹⁰

Arts and culture are critical to increasing tourism. In-state urban residents and tourists from outside the state come to rural Wisconsin to refresh, recreate and renew. Hundreds of thousands of people bring millions of dollars into the economies of Wisconsin’s vibrant rural places each year, encouraged as much by arts and culture as by scenic beauty and outdoor assets. Families who used to spend their time off sitting in a cabin taking in nature now also want, and sometimes expect, access to plentiful arts and cultural activities, along with interesting local foods, unique shopping and lots to do.

Creative rural Wisconsin arts and culture offerings foster cross-place connection, bridging and understanding. In places that provide robust arts and cultural activities, visitors leave with a heightened connection to the land, history, traditions and value of the rural places they visit and cultures they come to know. In recent years, rural Wisconsin places have offered more and more creative “connective tissue” opportunities that educate and elevate the vital contributions that rural Wisconsin makes to the vitality of *all* of Wisconsin.

Funding arts, culture and placemaking efforts is a unique Wisconsin challenge. Modest investments in arts and culture, matched by the passion and commitment of local volunteers, can pay surprising economic dividends and have an outsized effect on rural prosperity. Yet, funding to boost arts, culture and place is hard to come by in Wisconsin. Wisconsin’s per capita state agency dollars dedicated to the arts ranks 49th in the nation, and its legislative appropriation ranks last as a percentage of the state general fund expenditures.¹¹ Moreover, Wisconsin’s philanthropic infrastructure of private, family, corporate, health legacy and community foundations—key funders of arts and culture pursuits—is not as robust as that of many states, particularly those in the Great Lakes Midwest, and has more geographic concentration in southern Wisconsin, with most investment focused in urban areas.¹²

COVID-19 disruption threatens years of investment of building up arts and culture. Even in good times and with massive investments of volunteer time, the artistic and cultural events that make a place “good to live in”—and that bring in tourist spending—are seldom more than break-even ventures. While the state’s recent COVID-19 Cultural Organization Grant Program and related opportunities may have provided stop-gap funding, for many art centers, museums, festivals and events affected by pandemic shutdowns, or where social distancing has been tough to accomplish, enduring and recovering to full capacity post-COVID-19 may be difficult or impossible.

Ideas to explore: connecting through arts and culture

Rural stakeholders suggested to the Commission:

- **Invest strategically in community-driven art and culture to reap dividends for both rural and state economies.** Some rural stakeholders applauded the positive impact of the Wisconsin Regranting Program, which currently provides an annual grant to 12 local arts organizations (not all rural), which then re-grant those dollars to support arts projects in their communities. Additional organizations have requested participation in the program, so increasing funding could help expand its impact to additional rural communities. Other states are finding ways to boost support for the arts and their impact on rural economies. For example, Minnesota’s Legacy, created by constitutional amendment, dedicates a portion of sales tax revenue to the arts, culture, history, parks, trails, recreation and environmental quality. Can Wisconsin adapt any of these ideas?
- **Create rural-specific philanthropic funds and endowments.** Many statewide efforts across the nation have helped grow philanthropic endowments dedicated to specific rural regions and places. As just one example, over the last 25 years in Nebraska, 100 rural communities have established locally controlled community funds that each uses to address local issues and needs, including arts and culture. While state government may not lead the effort, it can convene to raise awareness of the idea. It can also provide charitable tax incentives for giving to local funds or provide a small match to get local endowments launched.



Wausau Chalkfest

CONNECTING THROUGH DIVERSITY



Wisconsin is home to 11 federally recognized Tribal Nations: Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, Ho-Chunk Nation, Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, Menominee Tribe of Wisconsin, Oneida Nation, Forest County Potawatomi, Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, St. Croix Chippewa, Sokaogon Chippewa (Mole Lake), and Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohican Indians, in addition to other, non-federally-recognized tribes. Each tribe has its own unique peoples, languages, and spiritual and health practices, and a sovereign government. Fifty-five percent of that Native population lives in rural areas outside metropolitan Wisconsin.

Additionally, Black Wisconsinites have been living and working throughout Wisconsin since the 1800s. Wisconsin was home to two thriving Black communities in rural Vernon and Grant counties that settled before the civil war and strived alongside their new neighbors who had recently immigrated from Europe.¹³ Black Wisconsinites continue to be important community members throughout rural Wisconsin.

Immigrants from Mexico, India, several Asian and African nations, and other places have come to call an increasingly diverse rural Wisconsin home. Rural Wisconsin has always encountered both genuine challenges and a wealth of opportunity as newcomers and new faces have entered community life. Over the Commission process, rural stakeholders were clear in their message to commissioners: **recognize and welcome Wisconsin's significant and growing diversity to ensure a prosperous and harmonious future for all residents.** Rural stakeholders told the commissioners:

“Even if the person doesn't look like you, relationships are key. A huge need I see is building the social and cultural capital of every member of our community, so that people have the quality of relationships upon which we can build collaborative initiatives to address community issues.”
Eau Claire County resident

Communities across rural Wisconsin are not homogeneously white. Native Americans and people of color live and work across rural Wisconsin, but their presence in and contributions to rural communities are largely ignored. Rural communities have long histories of immigration to America. Yet, in many places, the white, northern European stereotype of rural Wisconsinites leaves children and adults from other races and cultures feeling shut out of community decision-making, employment opportunities and other benefits and privileges of rural life.

Some rural Wisconsin communities are intentionally welcoming diversity, but every community could do more to ensure that all residents are welcome no matter their race, culture, religion or ethnicity. In places where most residents grew up together, it can take decades for a new resident to gain acceptance, even when there are no racial or cultural differences in play. Communities must be intentionally inclusive if they want to grow their economies, population and prosperity. Moments of exclusion have lasting impacts that often mean people of color leave the community.

Native, Black and immigrant communities operate rural businesses that create local jobs, attract tourists and contribute to rural well-being. In many places, immigrant businesses are an essential part of a local foods movement that supports the economy by bringing in tourists and producing local foods for urban markets. Immigrant-owned businesses provide essential services in many rural communities, including on Main Street. Tribal communities own and operate major enterprises in wood products and tourism that provide rural jobs, bring in tourists and generate revenue, and some also open their doors to their non-tribal neighbors, offering access to health care and other services.

Immigrants are essential workers, critical to industry and community life. Fifteen percent of all Wisconsin farmers, fishers and foresters are immigrants.¹⁴ Whether it is manufacturing, health care and social services, education, retail, dairy or other food processing industries, immigrants are essential to the operation of rural Wisconsin's major industry sectors that provide essential goods and services. Five counties in southwestern Wisconsin dairy country, for example, saw Hispanic population grow by at least 115% in the 2000-2010 Census count; two of those counties exceeded 300% growth.¹⁵ Managers in businesses that rely on immigrant labor understand many of their workers' challenges and appreciate their contributions, but seldom take the conversation beyond their own walls.

Youth, women, and people of color are least often—or not at all—at community decision-making tables. Rural communities in Wisconsin, much like the rest of the country, want more young people to move to their communities, and want the youth who

grow up in rural communities to stay or come back to raise their families. And every rural community is highly dependent on an army of volunteers to get basic things done—and always needs more. One stakeholder noted that last year's Barron City Council election included the first-ever Somali candidate, after decades of Somali refugee resettlement in the area. Another noted that the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) recently launched the Wisconsin Agriculture Youth Council, which encourages young Wisconsinites to engage with state government.¹⁶

Ideological divides create rancor—and impede both effort and progress. These days, even neighbors at times vilify neighbors who hold different opinions on political or social issues. Lack of civility negatively affects everyone. It undermines a community's ability to form consensus and get things done, and it holds back community progress and growth.

Some education-based initiatives are tackling issues of diversity and inclusion head-on—with promising results.

With the help of *We Are Many-United Against Hate*, schools in Baraboo, Dodgeville, Mount Horeb and Deerfield are working to ensure their students understand the roots of division, fear and

“It is important for us to become a more inclusive community – but I have no idea where to start.”
Bayfield County resident

hate; promote openness and tolerance; and respect and celebrate diversity. Dennis Beale, the founder of Power of Perception, a mentoring group for Black students in the Eau Claire Area School District, spoke to the Commission about the organization's success at helping students pursue

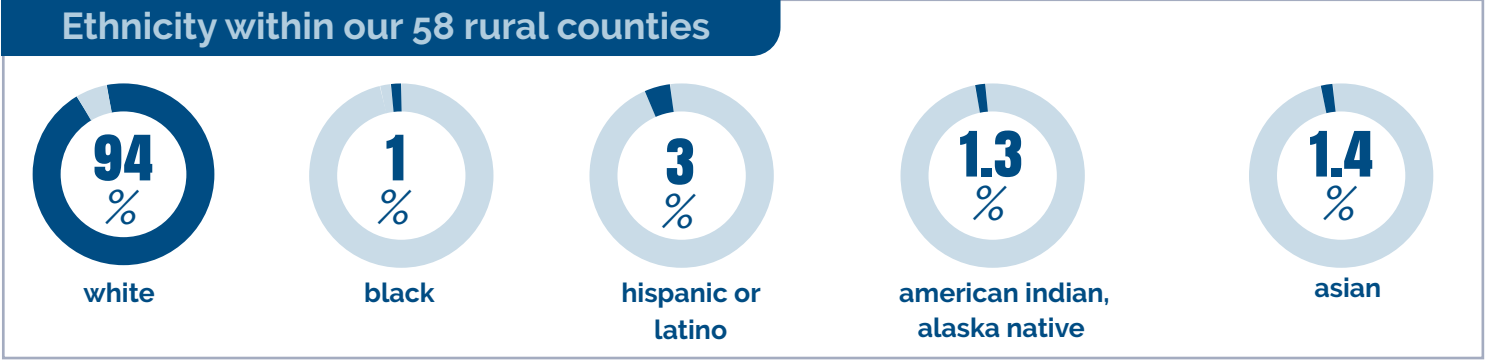
excellence and engage in community activities as they pursue their degrees. He hopes to find support to spread the program to Black and biracial youth in rural school districts.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accentuated every contribution and challenge of diversity.

COVID-19 as an illness has particularly affected people who work in jobs on the service frontlines including child care, elder care, health care, food production and services, and retail, which, even in rural Wisconsin, employ many immigrants and people of color. Small, immigrant-owned businesses that are food-, farm- or service-related have been especially prone to disruption from economic restrictions and social distancing. Language and cultural barriers kept many immigrant entrepreneurs from accessing federal and state COVID-19 relief programs and made it hard to reach out for help in their local communities.

Rural communities have joined calls for racial justice in 2020.

Rural immigrant workers who form the backbone of the production workforce in essential businesses have been subject to arrest, fines and deportation for showing up at jobs critical to the welfare of all Wisconsinites. Racial and political tensions have sapped energy, increased anxiety and slowed some progress. At the same time, some communities have seized the opportunity to pull together as never before.



Source: 2014-2018 U.S. Census American Community Survey

How the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa collaborated to respond to COVID-19

When the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa had its first COVID-19 case in March 2020, the Tribe's already-formed pandemic response team mobilized to contain the spread and address its many impacts. They also extended their efforts to help non-Tribal members in nearby northwest Wisconsin.

"Red Cliff took a very assertive and holistic approach," said Diane Erickson, health services administrator for the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, which includes 1,243 members living on the reservation, 535 living off the reservation in Bayfield County, and 5,766 members living outside the county.

"COVID-19 could be devastating with the health disparities our community has," said Erickson, noting a pre-COVID high incidence of diabetes, heart disease and cancers that have made health and safety efforts initiated by the Tribe during the pandemic all the more vital.

On the economic front, the Tribe opted to offer emergency paid sick leave to the Tribe's employees who had to miss work due to the pandemic. The Tribe expanded its family and medical leave (FMLA) options to prevent layoffs. To help its commercial fishermen who were unable to sell their catch after restaurants closed, the Tribe collaborated with several programs to buy the fish and deliver them not just to the reservation, but beyond to neighboring community food pantries. "We could help the fishermen and also get fresh products into the community," said Erickson.

The Tribe's casino, Legendary Waters, one of the region's largest employers, helped employees maintain income during the first of two shutdowns through benefits from the Paycheck Protection Program, the federal government's coronavirus small business aid. Paid sick leave has been available for employees in quarantine as well as FMLA salary protection for qualifying employees.

On the health front, the Tribe built up its testing capacity, also offering it to non-Native people in the city of Bayfield and its rural outskirts—sometimes to people as far as 70 miles away, such as employees of businesses and a nursing home that were unable to find testing for their staff.

"That's very important to us because we're such a rural community," said Erickson. "We've been available for testing any time the county nurse has contacted us." The Tribe and county also collaborated to bring a National Guard testing unit to various locations, including one on the reservation.

Early on, the Tribe launched a community outreach effort, making check-in calls to every "elder"—defined as people age 55 and over—in the Tribe's robust health care services' system, both Native and non-Native, to assess needs. The Tribe reached out to all its families with children attending Bayfield's public schools after remote learning went into effect. The school district and Tribe collaborated to provide more than 360 meals per day from March through August—close to 40,000 total—with school and Tribal staff from all divisions assisting.

The Tribe soon began offering home delivery of medication and food. Home-delivered meals to the elderly increased from 40 per day to 180 per day once congregate meals were discouraged. A hunger relief fund was set up to deliver food every two weeks, with staff from across the Tribe distributing food boxes. A community supply closet opened, stocked with toilet paper, masks and cleaning supplies available for delivery on and off the reservation.

For the reservation alone, the Tribe developed a contact tracing team and voluntary isolation housing for people who test positive. Three recreational vehicles were purchased to use as isolation units, providing people who opted to use the unit with food for ten days and wellness checks until they were cleared to return home.

When Wisconsin's Supreme Court overturned the state's "Safer at Home" order in May, the Red Cliff Tribe kept its order in place. It was later changed to an advisory. The Tribe also maintained its mask mandate. To provide accurate information during the emergency, the Tribe stepped up communications, revamping its website and social media. Electronic signs on the reservation relay messages that urge mask-wearing, advertise the availability of free food boxes, and more.

"Leadership set the tone for us," said Erickson, noting that the Tribal government and council's "heartfelt concern for the community's well-being" meant they would not implement a stay-at-home order without instituting measures to support the order. Although the Tribe quickly learned it could not prevent the virus's arrival, it learned to respond proactively, anticipating issues and preparing a response. In late October, for example, the Tribe was bracing for possible mental issues as well as the need to support Tribal members who are seasonal tourism workers. "We're looking three and six months down the road at the impact that this is going to have on our community," said Erickson. "We're always looking forward."

Ideas to explore: connecting through diversity

Rural stakeholders suggested to the Commission:

- **Consistently, persistently acknowledge that rural Wisconsin is diverse—and becoming more so—in discussions about Wisconsin policy and direction.** Celebrate and uplift examples of diversity in state publications and promotional materials. Provide resources for constructively teaching people what diversity means for success in school and work. Actively solicit diverse participation whenever the state reaches out for public input and comment in designing and implementing legislation, rules, regulations or services.
- **Expand support for specialized outreach for services critical to diverse communities.** The We're All In Small Business grants deserve praise for their intentional inclusion of immigrant businesses regardless of the documentation status of their owners. Assign specific staff the job of outreach to immigrant and Native communities for the purpose of explaining state funding streams, preparing applications and other technical assistance. Ensure that all state programs have culturally appropriate promotional materials in major languages spoken by immigrants, so all have access to programs for which they qualify.
- **Extend driver license eligibility to all who pass road tests, regardless of immigration status.** Maintain stability in the dairy industry workforce and reduce load on the criminal justice system by allowing all immigrants who pass a test the opportunity to drive legally. Fifteen states now allow this, including neighboring Illinois.¹⁷
- **Catalyze collaboration and action that increases diverse participation.** Consider embedding qualifying requirements or preferences in the state's grant, loan and technical assistance programs that require a deeper and wider diversity of community members in the design and implementation of local and regional efforts.
- **Diversify decision-making and community-doing bodies—with energy and intention—from whatever starting point.** Not just state, but local, government bodies and organizations can, as one person urged the Commission, "...work with what you have by looking at the village board and city council to have more diversity—whether, in your place's case, that means gender or age or race. Reach out to local high schools and the younger generation. We go to many council and board meetings and there is not a range of diversity. So there has to be concentrated and asserted effort coming from each unit of government, and this has to be a priority for us."

CONNECTING THROUGH COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA

Among the most visible—or audible!—things that have become more complex in just the last few decades is how and where we seek, find and receive information. Many of the developments in communication and media have had particularly intense impact on rural community life, learning and livelihoods. Rural stakeholders described to commissioners how: **innovation and change in communications and media are creating new challenges and opportunities for rural Wisconsin.**

Rural stakeholders told the commissioners:

Locally owned newspapers, TV stations and radio stations have given way to a dizzying array of digital sources that provide the information that people need to live their lives. Once a mainstay in every community, today few rural newspapers remain in circulation. Large chains have bought up most rural radio and TV stations, decreasing local content as well as the range of news and opinion broadcast in rural Wisconsin. As local stations and production have declined, the available broadcast media choices in rural Wisconsin now largely feature only national and international content, often on cable networks that have an ideological bent. New social media options and online content provide an

array of new opportunities to share and receive information—but only for those who have the broadband access and cellular connections needed to access them. Informal communications channels, ranging from church newsletters to the bulletin board in a local supermarket to the "shopper" classified ad bulletins, still abound in rural communities and add to the complex and diverse mix of communications channels available.

It's harder to find trustworthy and reliable sources of local information than it used to be. Increasingly, digital and online services like Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram and NextDoor have become the primary source for how most people get their news and information.¹⁸ This may increase the amount of information available in some rural communities, including some local content generated by community neighbors, businesses

“We have no local newspaper and limited local television coverage. We are in a news desert – so people retreat to their partisan corners.”

Oconto County resident

and organizations. But much is not local, and the sheer volume makes it hard to keep up and sort out. It’s wide open, so anyone with a story, entertainment, or an agenda can post information, gain a following and make news, which is good for democracy, creativity and business. But with no fact checks and no balances, it also means some bad actors push misleading, mistaken or disruptive content. And generations of Wisconsin adults who grew up with trustworthy, self-regulating media—as well as the youth who are growing up in today’s media world—don’t have sufficient tools to assess the credibility of their news, whether local, national or global. Few schools have stepped up to teach youth how to differentiate credibility of sources. Some students are taken in by unreliable sources and others conclude they can no longer trust anything they hear or read.¹⁹

Communication is critical to rural small business success. The proliferation of new communications vehicles challenges business in new ways: How can they best reach potential customers who used to read their local print ads or hear their commercials on local radio? At the same time, some newer media outlets provide business owners with a wider reach and new markets at much lower cost. As one small business owner told the Commission, “My business has thrived during COVID because I started a Facebook page—basically a virtual farmer’s market—where I’m able to do contactless sales. We have over 1,700 members in the Facebook group!”

Communication is essential for governing and rural access to government services and information. Changes in communication have also affected government’s success at “getting the word out” or for rural people to access the “final word” sources of government information. In rural Wisconsin, with local newspapers, radio and TV now not even present in some places, reduced library coverage and hours, postal service challenges, and the broadband issues, people have to work hard to get timely, clear government information. On the other side, both state and local governments have to scramble constantly to keep website information accurate and up to date, and to learn how best to deploy social media to provide timely, useful information, especially in times of crisis and emergency. The COVID-19 situation has only intensified the rural call for immediate and clear communication about what is happening in real time, what to do about it, and how government programs can help rural communities—before the better “connected” urban areas tap out all the available resources.

The United States Postal Service (USPS) provides a critical service to rural Wisconsin. Rural Wisconsinites frequently use the USPS to access medication, business supplies and more. Some stakeholders said the USPS is especially important to older adults in rural communities who do not have a cell phone or internet access. One stakeholder expressed concern that older adults who are unable to get to their mailbox are being denied door delivery by USPS.

The COVID-driven adoption of virtual meeting technology and e-commerce offers new economic and participation opportunities for rural people and enterprises—as long as they have good broadband access. For some companies, the COVID-19 forced mass experiment in conducting “virtual” work has been an outstanding success, lowering costs and increasing productivity. More companies are rethinking investments in large, centralized offices and moving to virtual and distributed work environments. This opens new opportunities for rural areas with good broadband services to attract jobs, residents and business. At the same time, the transition of national, statewide and regional conferences, workshops, learning opportunities and “important meetings” to virtual online settings has opened up opportunities for rural people to be at more tables where information and expertise are shared and decisions are made than ever before—and at a much lower cost of rural people’s time, dollars, wear and tear. Again, of course, that is assuming the bandwidth to do so, which will be addressed below.

Ideas to explore: connecting through communication and media

Rural stakeholders suggested to the Commission:

- **Fully utilize the rural media outlets that are still there.** Radio remains a potent way to get information out to rural areas. Even when owned by large conglomerates, it is the most localized and broadly accessed remaining media channel. Call-in programs are especially effective for getting deeper and more nuanced information to rural audiences. The decline of local print press removes a valuable source of local information and is detrimental to rural communities. Where local newspapers remain in operation, use them. Even weekly newspapers have good followings in places where they have survived. Don’t overlook the weekly classified advertising “shopper” publications. Most “shoppers” run a few stories, are widely distributed and read in rural communities, and are hungry for relevant content. It is often easy to submit a story and have it printed.
- **Use trusted local institutions and organizations to reach rural communities.** In the rural information ecosystem that does exist, research shows that the school system, faith-based organizations and libraries remain trusted institutions in rural places.²⁰ The state should make concerted efforts to involve them in a formal and well-organized way to reach rural people. Regional economic development groups can pull people together and create a two-way channel for the state to use when collecting and disseminating information in rural Wisconsin; they are also a likely source of solid mailing and e-mail distribution lists for formal and informal leaders throughout their regions.
- **Inform rural communities through rural youth.** The primary experts in using, consuming and innovating social media are young people, many of whom are looking for more things to do, and ways to be engaged, in rural communities. Consider youth as an untapped resource that can help close information gaps. What about giving rural youth the job of spreading accurate news to their families, neighbors and community on a set of issues or opportunities—and increasing their understanding of and investment in the community at the same time?
- **Ensure that Wisconsin’s youth gain the skills to assess the trustworthiness of information they receive.** Develop and deploy curriculum in public schools, colleges and universities to help Wisconsin youth understand the perspective and assess the trustworthiness of the news and information they receive.²¹

CONNECTING THROUGH BROADBAND

Broadband access, quality and price came up front and center in nearly every one of the scores of conversations that commissioners had with people, organizations and businesses during the Commission’s initial six-week listening period. Commissioners clearly heard: **broadband is a baseline requirement for a prosperous rural Wisconsin.** Rural stakeholders told the commissioners:

Access to quality broadband services at competitive rates is an issue across much of rural Wisconsin. The need for high-quality, high-speed universal broadband access for homes, businesses, and community and public services is the issue cited as most critical by most rural stakeholders. Even cellphone service, which is a given in metropolitan areas, is not available in some rural areas and spotty in others. Moreover, even where broadband is available in rural Wisconsin, customers typically pay a substantial premium to receive inferior service.²²

Broadband is essential for the effective—and cost-effective—delivery of nearly every service essential for community and family livelihoods. Broadband makes telehealth possible. Broadband makes K-12 and post-secondary telelearning possible. Broadband provides access

to job listings and workforce preparation programs. The delivery of government information and transactions with both government and private financial institutions and vendors is increasingly conducted online. Broadband reduces the cost of providing essential human services. It can help provide rapid public safety information.

“
I have three children grown. None has come back because they can’t work the internet jobs here. That is really holding back rural Wisconsin.
Trempealeau County resident

Broadband is essential to retaining, growing and attracting healthy for-profit and nonprofit businesses across rural Wisconsin.

Virtually every business today requires broadband service to remain competitive in a rapidly hyper-connecting world. Manufacturing businesses without robust broadband capacity cannot meet supply chain coordination requirements of major customers, which costs them markets, profits and jobs. Agriculture is increasingly dependent on broadband technology in every aspect of its operations, including precision agriculture. E-commerce options allow smaller specialty businesses to reach global markets, bringing more money into the local economy and allowing businesses to remain viable in rural places that cannot provide a large enough local market to sustain them. Both the most basic and the most rapidly growing sectors of the global economy are increasingly technology-driven; broadband is now simply a prerequisite to conducting business and growing jobs in almost every sector.

Broadband attracts people—including visitors, workforce and remote workers. Broadband access is a key criteria that workers evaluate when considering a job in a rural community. As the COVID experience has proven, many workers can now work from anywhere they can connect to broadband; some choose rural places they love when they can obtain the broadband access they need. Moreover, some companies now require (formally or informally) that workers maintain connectivity at all times, which drives worker decisions about where to vacation. Broadband makes it more attractive for people and families to remain longer in vacation properties and second homes, contributing more to rural economies.

Students that lack broadband access experience competitive disadvantages and large barriers to preparing for the 21st century workplace. Libraries, schools, colleges and universities increasingly use broadband to provide the full range of educational offerings and information resources. Lack of broadband access or quality cripples opportunities for rural students to pursue options like specialized, advanced placement and college-credit classes—and raises the cost of delivering education.

“
Broadband is no longer a luxury. It is a utility similar to electricity in the 1930’s. Use that same premise in an updated form.
We are at that point.
Sauk County resident

Broadband offers rural families with access to goods and services not available in their communities. Rural communities often do not have sufficient population or the market volume that will support a local business or provider offering some important goods, or to justify opening a government or professional service office in their community. Broadband access allows rural customers to secure the goods and services—getting a health check-in, applying for a mortgage, “seeing” their grandchildren, or buying a truck or the right shoes to wear to a wedding—they want or need that cannot be obtained locally. It can enable people to choose rural and allow residents to remain in their community.

Rural communities get better broadband results when they have ways to influence and hold broadband providers accountable. Major commercial internet and telecommunication service providers tend to focus their resources on the larger markets they serve. Their track record across the nation shows that rural customers are typically their last priority for providing and upgrading service. Relatively few rural areas in Wisconsin have managed to host competing service providers. As a result, some outside providers have, in effect, a monopoly in some communities and can dictate price, quality and coverage. Also as a result, rural consumers often pay more for sub-standard, spotty levels of internet speed and quality—service that would not be tolerated in metropolitan markets. Local units of government need the authority to influence the decisions of outside providers and demand that people in their areas receive the quality service they are promised at fair prices.

Rural communities are seeking ways to “grow their own” broadband – but it’s challenging process. Rural Wisconsin does boast several excellent examples of local coalitions, cooperatives and collaborative ventures that have formed their own enterprises to provide outstanding service at highly-competitive prices by doing it themselves. (See *Expanding Broadband in Bayfield* on page 34) Though doing so is possible, current Wisconsin statutes make it quite challenging,²³ and many rural stakeholders are calling on the state to make that route much easier. To put such a collaborative together, local municipalities often must act as the lead in creating the required complicated, multi-year plans that incorporate managing complicated grants. Many rural municipalities do not have budgets to employ a town administrator, who would be tasked with such a time-consuming project; they are largely staffed by part-time local residents who do their best to serve their communities with limited time. Moreover, they typically lack the professional connections to larger providers who will pay attention to their needs. These factors underline why technical assistance can be so beneficial to rural communities.



The COVID-19 pandemic has magnified the existing reality: connectivity is now as essential as any utility, and much of rural Wisconsin is not well connected. This year, rural stakeholders told the Commission, when rural broadband is lacking or insufficient, schools and businesses have little recourse except to risk their students, customers and workers’ health by operating onsite or to shut down altogether. Many medical facilities have gone virtual for services not requiring physical contact with patients; thus, rural residents lacking broadband are shut out of most preventative and routine health care, which may lead to more acute and life-threatening conditions. Rural schools in areas with poor broadband deployment have few options for supporting learning during pandemic lockdowns, and parents of those students share that struggle along with their children. Discrimination and poverty add to this challenging mix. Tribal communities, immigrants and communities of color across rural Wisconsin disproportionately lack broadband access.²⁴ And the many rural families that live at or below the United Way’s ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) family-income threshold²⁵ simply cannot afford broadband service where it is available—especially where the broadband cost exceeds what is typical in Wisconsin’s metro places.



Source: 2014-2018 U.S. Census American Community Survey

State and federal resources are helping with rural broadband deployment, but more is needed to fill the gap. Wisconsin’s rural stakeholders applaud the increased state and federal interest in addressing rural broadband issues. Many cite their use of the Public Service Commission of Wisconsin’s (PSC) Broadband Forward²⁶ certification process and Broadband Expansion Grants²⁷ as critical to forming local partnerships to increase broadband access in their communities. Others mentioned the creation of the Governor’s Task Force on Broadband Access as a hopeful step. And, even during this Blue Ribbon Commission on Rural Prosperity’s process, the COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed the creation of a new partnership between PSC and the Office of Rural Prosperity to launch the Broadband Connectors Pilot initiative, which provides technical assistance to communities seeking to expand broadband. More than 90 rural communities applied for six available pilot slots. By itself, the demand for those slots shows that communities need more support to build readiness so that they can apply for existing broadband funding opportunities. Many rural stakeholders express concern that the larger commercial providers have more influence over state decision-making processes about rural broadband than do rural residents, communities and businesses. Others criticize the use of the PSC’s broadband access maps, which they view as seriously inaccurate—a major issue when the map’s data has shut out the possibility to qualify for available grant funds. And the need to form partnerships to earn qualifying points for state funding is a problem when either providers or nearby communities decline to partner—a situation mentioned by several rural and tribal communities.

Rural stakeholders suggested to the Commission:

- **Set a bold, public goal for bringing high performance broadband to all of Wisconsin.** Once a goal is set and communicated as policy, it can help guide a range of needed changes to public and private policies and programs that have an impact on or are needed to accomplish that goal. The fact that Governor Evers has established a Task Force on Broadband Access, and that the chair of that Task Force is also a member of the Governor’s Blue Ribbon Commission on Rural Prosperity, is a good start.
- **Boost the funding for existing state assistance to rural broadband.** The Public Service Commission’s Broadband Expansion Grant Program has been working, but was already oversubscribed by a ratio of two to one even before the COVID-19 pandemic amplified the immediate need for broadband expansion across the state. Boost the funding for this program. And explore ways to leverage its use to weave more partners into funding the solution—for example, banks using CRA credits, hospitals, community foundations and others looking for impact investment opportunities that produce not just financial, but also community and equity, bottom-lines.
- **Create a method to hold providers accountable for the broadband service they claim to provide.** Rural residents and businesses often get a level of service that is inferior to the standard they pay for. The burden is currently on the consumer to determine whether or not that is the case. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) will be requiring all providers to conduct hourly speed tests starting in 2022, which may improve the situation. But in the meantime, how might the state provide a vehicle through which rural consumers can address and be protected from this practice?
- **Provide more broadband technical assistance to communities.** In addition to helping communities prepare to apply for state assistance, technical assistance providers could also increase communities’ readiness for federal broadband expansion opportunities. As trusted local partners and skilled facilitators, consider supporting UW-Extension staff to learn more about broadband and how to route communities to the technical assistance they need.
- **Ensure broadband coverage maps are accurate.** Rural residents regularly report that the current broadband coverage maps do not reflect the actual coverage they receive. Explore how other states are ensuring the accuracy of broadband maps through crowdsourcing and other strategies.
- **Review and consider revising state rules that make it complicated for communities and local leaders to take broadband action on their own.** To make it easier for communities to be part of the solution, review current legal restrictions, regulations, complex processes or scoring qualifiers that present obstacles to city, county, tribal, local collaborative or local cooperative ownership of—or action to provide—broadband service in unserved and underserved rural areas. Remove any restrictions that would disallow individuals from approving bonds or levies to build out broadband infrastructure and services. Don’t penalize local efforts that lack partners if partners won’t come to the table.
- **Explore and share “how-to” ideas from the “doer” rural Wisconsin communities and from what other states are doing.** Rural stakeholders cited several rural Wisconsin community efforts that have succeeded at providing better broadband and coverage. Especially now, in the wake of COVID-19, innovation is happening nationwide to hasten and improve rural coverage. Consider dedicating a special state staff effort to mine these policy and implementation ideas; to create new resources based on best practices; and to host virtual information, learning and advising sessions for rural community doers—and aspiring doers—in Wisconsin.

Expanding broadband in Bayfield

In northwestern Wisconsin, Bayfield County has made high-speed broadband a reality for many residents, as well as for second-home owners and visitors drawn to the area’s natural beauty. That connectivity has become all the more critical during the pandemic, when more people are working from home, attending school remotely and using telehealth services. “Bayfield County understands that broadband is very important in our very rural community,” said Mark Abeles-Allison, the county administrator. “We’re trying to create opportunities for people to not only live where they want and where they play, but to be able to work here through telecommuting. If we want people to live here and move here, access is critical.”

A combination of local government leadership, a local provider’s investment and government grants helped make their high-speed broadband expansion possible. Cooperation and collaboration have been key. Abeles-Allison said that adds up to “really spending time with our broadband providers, letting them know where we have a need and issues, and encouraging them to expand, as well as to seek assistance through the state broadband program. Grants have made a difference.”

When Wisconsin started offering grants several years ago, “on day one, we were all in,” said Abeles-Allison. At about the same time, Norvado, a local telecommunications cooperative serving a large portion of Bayfield County, decided to extend broadband fiber everywhere in the central, western and northern parts of the county.

Since 2009, Norvado has spent about \$70 million to upgrade the network infrastructure in its multi-county service area. As a result, in Bayfield County (population around 15,000), the company now provides fiber-based broadband to about 11,700 people in about 6,000 premises (90% residential, 10% businesses). To assist with this process, Bayfield County made it easier for fiber installation along highways. Financing came from Norvado’s internal funds, as well as loans from the US Department of Agriculture’s Rural Utilities Service, the Wisconsin Broadband Expansion Grant Program, and federal stimulus funds.

“The digital divide is a reality for many throughout our country who live in rural areas,” said Norvado CEO, Chad T. Young. “But in Bayfield County, our residents and businesses are no longer at a disadvantage, and have the capability to conduct business, attend distanced learning, stream video and surf the internet at speeds up to one gigabit.”

Yet more work remains. “We have areas that continue to have very poor service,” said Abeles-Allison. To address this, he adds, “We need to cooperate with anybody to make it happen. It’s critical to get the infrastructure out in whatever format.” This includes assisting other providers that offer different types of broadband technologies. The county built a cell tower in the county seat of Washburn. It also granted access to its towers to a newer provider, Bayfield Wireless, that supplies connectivity via radio frequencies delivered from a tower and focuses on under-served and remote areas of northern Wisconsin. “There’s always some frustration that taking broadband out to very rural areas is very costly. Sometimes it’s just not cost-effective,” Abeles-Allison said. If it doesn’t make sense to install, for example, four-miles worth of fiber to serve four customers, what are other solutions? “That’s where Bayfield Wireless opens up some opportunities,” he said.

The county is using its expanded connectivity as an economic development tool to retain and attract employers and employees, hoping to boost its population and tax base. Bayfield County earned state certifications as a “Broadband Forward Community” and “Telecommuter Forward Community” to help it meet those objectives.

By marketing itself as a telecommuting locale, the county aims to retain its young people and attract younger families, offsetting northern Wisconsin’s aging population and workforce. The hope is also that visitors and second-home owners will stay longer or even relocate.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for connectivity as many now work from home,” said Young. “Our area is now more attractive than areas without high-speed connectivity. We have seen a considerable rise in the number of internet subscribers since the start of the pandemic. Not only do long-time residents have a greater need for internet connectivity, but there has been a significant lift in real estate sales and people moving to our area.”

How are people doing?

CHILD CARE

Rural stakeholders express concern that child care is too often overlooked as essential for the prosperity of not just children, but their parents, communities and the current and future economy. In short: ***Rural Wisconsin faces a crisis in availability of high-quality, affordable child care that affects parents’ ability to work, the current and future well-being of children, and the capacity of businesses to operate and grow.*** Rural stakeholders told the Commission:

High-quality early education and child care are critical to the health, learning and futures of Wisconsin’s kids. It’s during the first five years of their lives that children learn foundational skills and develop connections in their brains that are key to their future success. For every dollar spent on early childhood, between four and nine dollars are recouped for society and the individual in the form of lower special education costs, higher income, lower health expenditures, higher graduation rates, lower teen pregnancy rates, lower incarceration rates and other indicators.²⁹ Despite the incredible impact child care providers have on young children, some providers were disheartened by the lack of dignity and respect they receive, saying they are treated as “glorified babysitters” instead of professionals. They seek recognition that education starts at birth, and their profession provides safe, reliable, quality and affordable early childhood learning.

Shortages of child care exist in every corner of rural Wisconsin. Over half of Wisconsin’s population lives in a child care desert.³⁰ Virtually every town, county and city reports a shortage of slots and long waiting lists. With the pandemic threatening businesses across Wisconsin, an estimated 40% of early care providers statewide have had to shut down services.³¹

Lack of child care keeps potential workers from seeking and accepting jobs and advancing in their careers. Over 70% of Wisconsin’s households with children have all available adults working, which means those families depend on child care. Parents who cannot find affordable, convenient, quality, safe child care cannot pursue work, training or education. Child care is especially hard to find for those working outside daytime 8 a.m.-5 p.m. hours. And child care is expensive, which at times means it makes no economic sense for a parent to accept a low-paying job that doesn’t cover the cost of child care. Moreover, without child care, parents cannot train for the skill sets that employers need to fill new types of jobs or those higher up on the pay scale.



Lack of child care affects rural business operations and potential. The scarcity of child care means employers face challenges finding professionals from the region, recruiting employees with families from outside the area, and retaining both. In 2017, “access to child care” tied with “employee retention” as the number two obstacle Wisconsin employers are facing in keeping their businesses going and growing. This situation can both burden employers with turnover costs and reduce their possibilities for innovation and expansion. States that budget for child care have an economic development advantage both for growing existing businesses and attracting new ones.³²

Lack of rural child care options can drive population losses and deter any gains. Communities cannot retain or attract young families if there is no child care available for them, as this prevents parents from working, going to school or engaging in community activities.

The scarcity of child care affects its quality. When the supply of child care is too low, parents may end up settling for less, because shortages make it hard for parents to insist on quality. Often, parents take whatever child care arrangement they can find just so they can sustain their livelihoods.

Child care is provided by multiple systems, some regulated and some unregulated. Group centers, school-based programs, and family (regulated in-home) child care, and less formal family/neighbor care providers all have different rules—which makes it confusing and difficult for communities to plan and develop resources to meet the need. Child care providers indicated it is challenging to navigate state programs and desired more coordination between the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) and the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF).

Low pay makes it hard to find child care professionals, for child care professionals to make their own ends meet, and for children to advance. A child care teacher with an associate degree starts at \$10 an hour in a group center and rarely makes more than \$13 an hour, without benefits.³³ That compares to an average of \$18.57 an hour (plus benefits) for other associate degree jobs in Wisconsin. Child care providers who have a four-year bachelor’s degree average only \$12 an hour, which totals to \$24,960 annually—less than dog walkers, crossing guards, and many other jobs. The average pay for family/home child care providers works out to less than minimum wage for a workweek that typically exceeds 60 hours. Many child care professionals have to rely on at least one form of public assistance despite working full time or more. Even very low skill workers can do significantly better working at Walmart or a convenience store

than in a child care job. It is nearly impossible to attract and retain talent without paying a living wage. Indeed, 35% of the child care workforce leaves the field each year due to low pay and lack of benefits.³⁴ Since brain development in young children relies on relationship building, staff turnover can also be detrimental to child development.

The business model for rural child care is broken. In essence, ensuring child care quality and its affordability are competing goals. Parent fees barely cover operating costs at even the most well-managed group centers. If a child care business pays enough to retain well-qualified staff, most parents cannot afford the cost. Low pay increases staff turnover, and turnover is expensive. Moreover, startup costs, facilities and equipment cannot be covered by fee income, and regulation and insurance changes drive up costs. Many group centers simply cannot afford to operate without some form of outside subsidy, like free or below-market rent, and 10% have closed since 2010. More than two-thirds of family regulated providers have gone out of business over the last decade.³⁵ Many rural child care providers said they are barely operating on a break-even budget. As one rural child care provider said, “We stay just above water and that’s what we do.” Due to staff to child ratios for various age groups, one provider said she loses 40% of her budget in caring for 0-1 year-olds, she breaks even caring for 2 year-olds, and she earns 40% of her budget in caring for 3-4 year-olds. Consequently, some child care providers warned that removing 3-4 year-olds would further erode the business model and make it impossible for them to stay open.

Young children have unique early development needs. Rural child care providers expressed that child care facilities and educational approaches should not be based on K-12 models. Even when child care is housed in schools, educational approaches should be based on proven early childhood development models that allow young children to thrive.

COVID has magnified the pre-existing problems and created new ones. Rural providers reported that DCF has stepped in with the Child Care Counts COVID-19 Supplementary Payment Program and has been responsive to providers by addressing health and safety practices during the crisis. Even so, the pandemic situation has caused even more centers to close—some for the time being, but some for good. Many will never reopen without outside subsidy because they incurred unrecoverable losses during the pandemic if their costs continued but their revenue ceased. As one rural child care provider said, “We teeter on whether we stay open or not. I’m the only provider in my school district. As the director and owner, some weeks I don’t get paid.” Center-based care has been particularly affected—and, since they are licensed to serve more children, the impact is immense.



Yet, the economy will not fully recover from COVID-19 unless there is sufficient child care for parents to return to their jobs.

Some inventive rural child care models are getting under way and making progress. Despite the daunting challenges, a few approaches are emerging in Wisconsin that may inspire other communities. Some public-private partnerships, involving tribes, colleges, Workforce Investment Boards, rural school districts, economic development partners and others are taking on the issue and making some progress that can inform other rural collaboratives. In other states, some communities are placing child care in school facilities, underutilized because of declining populations, to eliminate a portion of facility costs; some are also hiring child care center employees through the school district, which includes benefits—something that’s rare for child care professionals and aids in their recruitment and retention.

Ideas to explore: child care

Rural stakeholders suggested to the Commission:

- **Make child care and its funding a clear state priority.** Incorporate the understanding that high-quality early childhood care is a childhood development issue, a family issue, as well as an education, workforce and economic development issue; imperative in all relevant aspects of state policy and programming. Support efforts to recognize child care providers as the professionals they are and acknowledge the critical, foundational role they play in preparing children for success. Continue support for the Wisconsin Shares Child Care Subsidy Program.
- **Foster the development of more public/private partnerships to develop and sustain rural child care options.** Not unlike rural broadband access, this challenge is not limited to rural Wisconsin; it is a nationwide concern across rural America. What can we learn from innovators in Wisconsin and in other states? Identify rural child care initiatives that are making progress addressing the affordability, business model, wage, turnover and quality aspects of 0-5 year old child care—including collaboratives, coops, employer partnerships, school-based, shared administrative backbones, universal early childhood centers, and other approaches.
- **Support child care professional development, mentoring and information sharing.** Design ways to share the best practical ideas, resources and advice as it surfaces in the field with peer rural communities in Wisconsin that are working on their child care challenges.
- **Provide a central point of contact at the state level for child care providers.** To address difficulty in navigating state programs, designate a clear entry point for child care providers to access state government resources and improve coordination between DPI and DCF. The Governor’s Early Childhood Advisory Committee is well-poised to help coordinate this work.

Providing comprehensive child care center on the Lac Courte Oreilles Tribe reservation

A new child care center scheduled to open in spring 2021 on the Lac Courte Oreilles Reservation in northern Wisconsin promises to not only help working parents but provide jobs for early childhood education graduates of the Tribe’s community college.

About 2,306 tribal members live on or near the reservation, as well as 708 non-tribal members. “There is a huge need for day care,” said Nicole Homer, the Tribe’s lawyer who is overseeing the project, citing a community needs assessment that identified a shortage of affordable, quality child care in the county. Respondents to that assessment included many of the 900 or so employees of the Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians—Sawyer County’s largest employer via jobs at its casino and in tribal government.

The COVID-19 crisis has further aggravated the problem, with school closures throwing a wrench in working parents’ child care arrangements. Even where schools have opened, many parents have kept their children home due to family health concerns.

“Some people are not working because of the lack of child care,” Homer said. “(The new child care center) is going to give an opportunity for those individuals to apply and work for the Tribe or elsewhere. That’s the huge benefit.”

Under construction through all of 2020, the reservation’s first child care center plans to serve about 200 children from birth to early elementary-school age, offering full-time care as well as before-and-after-school care at a sliding scale fee. Designed to serve the children of both Native and non-Native Tribal employees, the center will also provide much-needed wrap-around care for children attending Head Start, a federal early childhood program promoting school readiness for children, birth to age 5, from low-income families. The new center will be located right next to the Tribe’s Head Start building.

The child care center expects to hire about 28 staff. Thanks to a partnership with nearby Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe College, it will have a strong potential labor pool of graduates from the college’s early childhood education program. “It’s a pathway to employment,” said Homer. “Hopefully, we’ll funnel them into positions within the day care.”The new center will also make it easier for working parents attending the college, where the average student is a 36-year-old woman with young children. “Our students and the staff that work with tribal governing don’t have enough child care,” said Jessica Wagner-Schultz, the college’s institutional advancement director and a working parent who knows from experience that “child care is extremely difficult to find in this region.” Some funding for the \$3.3 million child care center will come from money the Tribe received from the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act as well as from tribal-specific federal funds.About 75 miles north, on the Bad River Reservation, working families in need of affordable child care got a promising option in spring 2020 when a new Head Start Center opened to serve 114 children, replacing a smaller 23-year-old building.

The new state-of-the art building—which will bring 12 new jobs to the community—was funded through a variety of grants, including \$1 million from the Office of Head Start and the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community, based in Minnesota, which has donated more than \$4 million to 16 tribes across the country.

Due to a pandemic that has forced the closure of nonessential businesses, the program has been providing services only remotely, sending activities, supplies and food home to members of the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa.

“Right now the Tribe is in a Safer at Home Order, so not many of the buildings are open, including the casino, and most people are working from home,” said Head Start Director Luanne Wiggins. “Once the order is lifted, we are ready”.

SCHOOLS AND EDUCATION

Rural stakeholders are rightly proud of the quality of Wisconsin's schools, colleges and university system. Their message to commissioners is: **Wisconsin's excellent K-12 and post-secondary education systems are a huge asset for rural communities, and we must sustain and leverage that asset.** Rural stakeholders told the commissioners:

Quality K-12 schools and education are a solid, valued strength across rural Wisconsin. Rural Wisconsinites who provided their ideas during the Commission process voiced almost universal praise for the quality of the K-12 schools in the 157 rural school districts across the state. Many pointed to largely unsung innovative districts in which rural students and curriculum are engaging with local community efforts, business development and careers.

Even so, warning signs raise concern about rural K-12 education. Even before COVID-19, the lack of broadband coverage was hurting affected rural schools and students, making it hard to prepare students for the connected 21st Century world. Many cannot offer the range of options their metro counterparts provide, like using technology to bring in new content expertise and engagement methods—nor can their students access upper-level, advanced placement and college dual-enrollment opportunities offered only online. Declining enrollment and tax bases in some rural places, coupled with the state funding formula, make it hard to maintain quality schools. Rural districts welcomed the state's recent increase, the first in ten years, for special education funding, as many have been using general funds designated for other needs to fill special ed funding gaps—but more is needed.

Some rural areas find it difficult to recruit teachers. One rural resident summed it up: "Teachers are working well and hard. Between reopening plans and dividing teaching between virtual and in-person, we are depending on them and demanding a great deal." That demand is placed on rural teachers who earn fairly low salaries as it is.³⁶ Their pay range makes it hard for teachers to find housing in Wisconsin's many rural communities—especially where housing costs have climbed: popular tourism areas, second-home locales, and rural counties where breadwinners commute to jobs in adjacent metro areas. Teachers need and deserve decent affordable housing, and the lack of it is making it hard to recruit teachers in parts of rural Wisconsin. The DPI previously oversaw a Rural School Teacher Talent Pilot Program that provided stipends for student teacher and internship placements in rural districts.

Staff and budget shortages affect student health, safety, and futures. As in much of rural America, rural school districts in Wisconsin have cut back on school counselors for budgetary reasons.³⁷ As a result, rural schools at times must turn to police for disciplinary actions if there is no staff available to handle behavioral issues. This can lead to students who really need mental and emotional health support ending up in juvenile detention instead. A pilot launched in 2019 by the Lake Holcombe School District in partnership with Prevea Health has been connecting students who have no transportation to mental health services that are towns away through a telehealth video-conferencing system. The district estimated the percent of their students struggling with mental health was greater than or equal to the state average of 20% of students. Their pilot, funded through the DPI, may provide a cost-effective way to get students needed therapy by addressing the obstacles of a lack of local providers and distance to services.³⁸

In the time of COVID, schools face broadband, equipment, parent and flexibility challenges. Teaching a class virtually is not possible when many (or all) students lack broadband access. Even where broadband covers rural communities, some families cannot afford the basics their children need for education at home, like internet connections, computers or printers. And, as one put it, "Parents are not teachers." Many COVID-19 education options depend heavily on parent involvement, which isn't always possible—such as when both parents must work outside the home to make ends meet, or when immigrants don't have the language skills to help with children's assignments. One rural Wisconsinite painted the picture: "Working class parents can't work if they have to drive and sit with their children in the car to access public Wi-Fi hotspots"—and doing classes in parking lots is not a sustainable strategy for the winter. Another offered: "I know some rural students who did not get their assignments and took 'F's' for their classes." Tribal areas, which typically have scarcer broadband access, have many students who live in multigenerational households, increasing health consequences if students do go to school and run the risk of bringing COVID-19 home. Technical colleges and the UW System share their enrollment distress with rural students when virtual education is the delivery system and their students live in broadband deserts. Rural K-12 educators also call for some regulatory flexibility on how student attendance is counted and for allowing teacher reassignments across grade levels in short-staffed rural schools; both of these can deeply affect rural school bottom lines, at least until the health crisis is over and schooling returns to in-person instruction.



The technical college system is a critical, working resource for training workers for rural jobs. A larger proportion of rural than urban jobs require a technical education (as opposed to a four-year degree). Tech colleges are the go-to resource to train for these jobs. Rural Wisconsinites clearly appreciate many tech colleges in rural Wisconsin for doing a good job of tailoring their curricula to the current needs of local employers—like wood technology, health-related jobs, and welding—and partnering with those employers to train local people for local jobs. Issues were raised with Commissioners, however, about the lack of transferability of credits from one tech college to another, and from tech college to four-year programs, which can make it hard for rural students and workers to gain the credentials they need to advance in their careers and family livelihoods.

Tribal colleges help to preserve cultural knowledge and provide incredible benefits to the rural economy. Wisconsin's two tribal colleges—College of the Menominee Nation and Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwa College—provide quality higher learning and technical training to Native and non-Native students alike. The tribal colleges support hundreds of jobs and are significant economic drivers in their regions. A 2011 economic impact study found that the College of Menominee Nation contributed more than \$37 million per year to

“ I spent most of my life growing up in Northern Illinois and it was always quite an envy to see the state of Wisconsin having great quality education in rural areas through the UW system. It is a great backbone – of great importance so that everybody can have access to education. The UW system – along with the community and technical colleges – is the real rural asset that we have throughout the state.

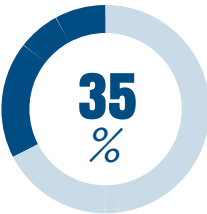
Iowa County resident

the regional economy.³⁹ The tribal colleges offer culturally responsive curriculum that incorporates Native knowledge and are exploring opportunities to strengthen college success pathways for Native students. For example, in partnership with UW-Madison, the two tribal colleges were recently awarded a U.S. Department of Agriculture grant to support Native American education pathways from secondary to postsecondary education.⁴⁰

The University of Wisconsin System, with its broadly distributed campuses, is a huge asset, highly valued by rural Wisconsin. Rural stakeholders consistently, persistently and greatly value the UW System as a “gem,” and consider it a critical state resource and partner for a wide range of planning and actions regarding rural community and economic development. UW-Extension rises to the top of many lists as an essential contributor to advancing rural prosperity; some express concern about negative impacts from cuts to the 72-county UW-Extension network—especially troubling in light of the many suggestions to the Commission about additional ways UW-Extension might be used to help rural communities, people and businesses address key issues and opportunities. The UniverCity Year Partnership between UW-Madison and Wisconsin communities is an example of the “Wisconsin Idea” in action. One more quality of the UW System came up: its presence in so many rural Wisconsin communities as an attractor for young people. When students can attend a college or university in a rural community, they are more likely to attach to the community and make a life there. Overall, five years after obtaining a degree, 87% of Wisconsin residents who graduate from a UW System school remain in Wisconsin.⁴¹ Some stakeholders did express concerns about student debt and pointed to the August 2020 report of the Governor's Task Force on Student Debt. One recommendation in the report suggests targeted student loan relief programs for specific geographic areas or high-demand professions, such as incentivizing new attorneys to practice in rural areas.

Rural stakeholders suggested to the Commission:

- **Cover rural Wisconsin with broadband—and ensure families have access to the equipment to use it for education and learning.** Besides the suggestions in the Rural Broadband section (see page 29), state Executive and Legislative leaders can call for and lead collaborative state and local public/private efforts to get devices and connections to kids, with targeted support for economically struggling families.
- **Support funding for rural schools.** Restore the state’s commitment to provide two-thirds funding for public schools that was generally in effect from 1997 to 2003. Increase funding for DPI’s Sparsity Aid Program, which was created in 2007 and provides funding specifically to rural school districts.
- **Consider and strengthen programs to support teacher attraction and retainment.** Teacher salaries make it hard to live in—or move to—many rural locations. Many rural areas experience an overall shortage of rental housing or affordable housing for purchase, making it hard to recruit starting teachers. Explore what communities in Wisconsin and other states are doing to help build or secure a share of affordable housing for teachers. Support and make permanent DPI’s Rural School Teacher Talent Pilot Program.
- **Provide more rule flexibility for rural districts to be creative and reduce costs.** Allow state agencies to issue waivers when rural schools find creative ways to meet the intent of rules in ways that work better in rural areas and/or reduce costs.
- **Increase state support for special education funding and school counseling staff.** Last year’s increase in funding for special education was a good step, but it does not make up for lost ground over the 10 years that saw no increase. Help foster partnerships and/or provide funding for sufficient rural school counseling and mental health care so that it is available for all students in need. Consider opportunities to support telehealth in schools through expansion of the School-Based Mental Health Services Grant Program.
- **Facilitate the transferability of credits between post-secondary institutions.** The UW System and Wisconsin Technical College System have numerous transfer and credit articulation agreements⁴² already in place, but stakeholders told the Commission some transfers are still challenging. If the relevant state agencies and institutions can find a way to further streamline, simplify and clarify credit transfers, it will be a win for students, college enrollment, the state’s workforce talent development and the Wisconsin businesses that employ that talent.
- **Strengthen UW-Extension.** UW-Extension’s network provides both eyes and ears for the state on what is happening in rural areas. UW-Extension also funds positions within UW-Madison’s College of Agricultural and Life Sciences that help bring important research discoveries out to rural partners to bolster rural and farm economies. UW-Extension programs benefit rural people, businesses, elected leaders and collaboratives across a wide range of action through facilitation and technical assistance. Making it stronger through more funding, peer-learning, a renewed mission and additional programming tailored to changing rural conditions would be a clear “don’t-reinvent-the-wheel” win for rural prosperity.



of people have an associates degree or higher within our rural 58 counties

Source: 2014-2018 U.S. Census American Community Survey

Learning by doing: Wisconsin students get real-world experience

Working on the small farm at their high school is inspiring students in the western Wisconsin community of New Richmond (population around 9,167) to pursue agriculture-related college degrees and careers, from poultry management to agronomy. “It’s turning out some fantastic members of the workforce, with about 75% of them coming home,” said Rachel Sauvola, an agriscience instructor who oversees the farm, also known as the SOAR Educational Center.

SOAR stands for “Student Opportunities with Agricultural Resources,” which is fitting. Run by New Richmond High School students, the farm provides a real-world learning experience to complement the students’ classes in animal science, horticulture, crop and soil science, environmental science, food science, and veterinary science. The students learn how to produce meat and vegetables on the 20-acre site located about five miles from their high school. The farm is also used for science class field trips for students of all ages. As of Fall 2020, the farm includes a 6.5-acre field, a pole shed and four pastures, with 21 head of beef cattle, 60 egg-laying hens, 12 egg-laying ducks and 5 goats.

When it comes to community impact, the farm offers more than learning opportunities and exposure to career skills and options for students. The farm also produces food for the school district and beyond. To date, the farm has produced 9,100 pounds of beef used for school lunches and sold another 2,700 pounds of prime-cut steaks to the community. Produce from the farm’s garden is used for school meals and eggs are sold to the community. Crops are sold to an animal feed company.

“It’s such a neat celebration of traditional agriculture coming back to the forefront and it has brought some awesome prosperity, particularly to our school district,” said Sauvola. “The entire community gains a better understanding of where food comes from. It’s also really, really fun.”

A community collaboration, the farm is funded through grants and donations—from hay bales to eggs cartons to farm animals—from 38 local businesses and 32 farms, families and individuals. The land is leased in partnership with the city of New Richmond. Always welcome, community volunteers flocked to the farm to pitch in during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic when extra help was needed after the school district switched to remote learning. SOAR also offered virtual farm tours via Zoom to many families. The 16 different agricultural education classes Sauvola teaches at the high school have seen an uptick in interest. In 2008, 20 students were in the large animal science classes; today, there are about 120

students. Many of these students get involved on the farm. Advanced animal science students apply to be part of farm management, currently overseen by seven students. By learning how to plant and tend to gardens, how to butcher cattle, how to budget and bill clients, and how much it costs to run a farm, the students gain valuable exposure to a variety of careers needed in their community. “They learn the connection to real life work and the economy,” said Sauvola.

New Richmond is just one rural Wisconsin community creatively adapting their K-12 school curriculum to meet local workforce needs. About 130 miles north, at Northwestern High School in Maple (population around 744), is Tiger Manufacturing, a student-run business selling student-made goods produced in construction and manufacturing classes, like welding, woodworking, small engine repair and computer-aided drafting. Tiger Manufacturing’s sales from custom jobs for local clients, as well as metal and wood artwork, topped \$10,000 in 2019, with proceeds going back to support the program.

Designed for learning as well as business, Tiger Manufacturing provides students with valuable trade and business skills needed in the local workforce. “Many students are recruited by our small, rural businesses because they already have the skill sets that those businesses need,” said Dr. Sara Croney, the school district superintendent. “Through our education, we are providing those skills.” Launched in 2016, Tiger Manufacturing’s company president and vice president are students, overseen by the high school’s technology education instructor. Students brainstorm what to sell and how to design their wares. They discuss marketing, work with clients and prepare invoices. They learn how to collaborate and think creatively, as well as how to meet community needs.

One of the company’s clients is a local chamber of commerce that commissioned them to produce medals and promotional items for a local sled dog race. Students presented designs to the chamber and collaborated with another high school tech ed program to etch designs into glasses, leather keychains and plaques using a laser engraver. Another recent commission was a veteran’s memorial for a park. Tiger Manufacturing has also sold artwork at craft fairs, including Lake Superior wall hangings cut from metal. In these and other rural Wisconsin schools, connecting students to area jobs or enterprises—and engaging other residents in the process—results in a bounty of benefits for young people, local businesses and the entire community.

HEALTH AND HEALTH CARE

The health status of people—which includes their physical, mental and emotional well-being—plays a key role in determining if and how well people learn, participate in the economy and thrive. Stakeholders clearly told commissioners: **lack of access to essential physical and mental health services is hurting the people and economy across rural Wisconsin.** Rural stakeholders told the commissioners:

Health outcomes overall in rural and tribal Wisconsin lag the rest of the state.⁴³ Taken as a group, both health outcomes and health behaviors in Wisconsin's rural counties are not in good shape. As is true across the state and the nation, rural lower-income families and minority populations are especially at risk. The University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute defines health equity as “the idea that everyone has a fair and just opportunity to be as healthy as possible, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, income, location, or any other factor.” In 2019, Governor Evers created the Governor’s Health Equity Council to develop a plan to reduce and eliminate health disparities throughout Wisconsin.⁴⁵

Mental health and substance abuse issues are significant and growing in rural Wisconsin. Many rural stakeholders raised deep concern about rural residents—from youth to farmers to veterans to the unemployed and more—who are suffering from mental illness and emotional trauma. For example, farmer suicide is on the rise and needs special attention and resources.⁴⁶ Stakeholders also underline alcohol and drug abuse, including the addiction to opioids that has plagued the nation in recent years. These problems persist and are growing in rural areas, especially those that offer less opportunity to make a good living.⁴⁷ With a shortage of rural social workers, therapists, psychologists and pediatricians, families are often forced to wait extremely long periods of time or drive long distances to get appointments with the necessary health providers for drug treatment and mental health concerns.⁴⁸ The COVID-19 pandemic has led to increased levels of anxiety, stress, and isolation, heightening concerns about the prevalence of negative coping mechanisms such as substance abuse. The main data source for information on non-fatal opioid overdoses is emergency department visits. DHS uses a syndromic surveillance system called ESSENCE, which tracks emergency department visits on a daily basis. ESSENCE data showed that there were more suspected overdoses in Wisconsin during the first three quarters of 2020 than all of 2019. In April through October 2019, for example, there was an average of 461 overdoses per month. During the same timeframe in 2020, there was an average of 597 overdoses per month.

Access to health care services and facilities is in serious condition in much of rural Wisconsin. Stakeholders also raised deep concern about the lack of nearby health care professionals, care centers and rural hospitals. Indeed, though about 20% of Wisconsin's population is rural, less than 10% of the state's physicians practice in rural areas.⁴⁹ Rural counties have higher levels of unmet need for mental health services; some rural Wisconsin counties are in the nation's top quartile in terms of need for mental health professionals. Across the state's health care workforce, rural areas struggle to meet demand for services. There are dentist shortages across rural Wisconsin; many are not accepting new patients, and dentists that accept Medicaid are hard to find.⁵⁰ 46 of Wisconsin's Hospital Service Areas (HSAs) do not have any kind of behavioral health provider located nearby.⁵¹ Statewide, only 19% of need for psychiatrists is met.⁵² Only 14% of new pharmacists practice in rural areas.⁵³ And of the 20 counties in the Wisconsin that do not have a practicing OB-GYN, all are rural.⁵⁴

Rural Wisconsin does benefit from a dozen tribal health care centers,⁵⁵ 100 rural health clinics, and 25 federally qualified health centers.⁵⁶ Most tribal health and dental clinics are open to non-Natives, which increases health care access for non-tribal members in some underserved rural areas. Stakeholders applauded the work of the Rural Wisconsin Health Cooperative, which has built a strong statewide network of rural hospitals and fostered collaborative efforts, information sharing and creative solutions. Some rural communities are proud that they organize and run free dental and medical clinics with volunteer labor, driven by strong faith communities, to make sure community members have some care—a wonderful program, but only sustainable as long as there are sufficient volunteers. When it comes to rural hospitals, Wisconsin has closed only one since 2011—a better situation than in many states, in large part due to the state's non-profit health systems and enduring health cooperatives, plus productive hospital collaborations. However, as across the nation, the viability of rural hospitals across Wisconsin is threatened by low reimbursement rates and the cost of unreimbursed care.

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I lived in Milwaukee for years, and never thought about the ease of going to urgent care at midnight or on weekends. But to drive on Sunday with a kid to Minocqua or Marshfield ... it could be life or death.

Sawyer County resident



Overall, the fact that so many health services are geographically few and far between concerns many rural people who have to drive long distances in the case of serious illnesses or emergencies. And others, like those required to meet with alcohol or other dependency abuse counselors as part of their treatment, are hard-pressed to arrange appointments with professionals who are an hour or more away if their driver's license remains suspended or they have no vehicle.

There is insufficient access to health promotion and disease prevention programs in rural communities. This is a symptom of Wisconsin's public health system being underfunded as a whole. Investing in public health ensures that health strategies and programs are not simply reactive—they are proactive in promoting health and preventing disease. Rural stakeholders sought to expand access to programs that focus on prevention. Accepting federal dollars, such as through Medicaid expansion, would help to expand rural health care access.

A substantial portion of rural Wisconsinites still have no health insurance.⁵⁷ Family and individual health insurance coverage across the nation has increased since the passage and implementation of the Affordable Care Act (ACA). But some people still lack or have only minimal coverage, largely because thousands of rural Wisconsin families cannot afford needed care. Because of the rural industry mix and typical business size, fewer rural employers provide health insurance to full-time employees, most part-time and seasonal employees don't work enough hours to qualify for it even if their employers do provide it, and the many self-employed

workers must fend for themselves. Since the state did not expand Medicaid as fully as possible under the ACA, many families lacking insurance who might have qualified for Medicaid are not covered. Families who fall between the cracks may not be able to afford insurance premiums, even on the ACA marketplace.

Businesses need healthy workers and hesitate to invest in places without good health care resources. The quality of a place's health care system affects workforce participation and absenteeism. Insurance rates are influenced by the overall health of a county's population, among other factors, adding substantial costs for businesses in rural places with poor health care access, or influencing companies to drop coverage for their workers. Business owners and managers who make location decisions also consider their own access to health care when deciding where to open or expand.

Limited health care service influences population loss. The availability of good and convenient health care services also affects young families and potential new employees considering a move to rural Wisconsin. Rural Wisconsin also has a large share of aging and older adults who require more access to services; reduced service makes it harder for rural seniors to remain in their homes and communities. For example, over 50% of veterans in Wisconsin are age 65 or older.⁵⁸ Wisconsin is home to three VA Medical Centers, only one of which is in a rural community—Tomah—although there are numerous VA Outpatient Clinics in rural areas.

COVID-19 is greatly magnifying and stressing the challenges already threatening rural health and the rural health care system.

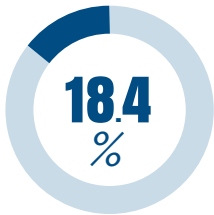
The community spread of COVID-19 has increased in rural Wisconsin over the course of this Commission process—significantly more so since the Commission ended its public listening sessions in September. But even at that earlier stage, rural people volunteering their input to the Commission’s open process reported that COVID has put immense strains on families through temporary or permanent job loss, schooling disruptions and uncertainty about the future, which has increased the incidence of mental health problems.⁵⁹ That, coupled with the virus itself, is swamping already inadequate resources. And for many people, job loss has also meant the loss of health insurance—and few, if any, ways to obtain it. For hospitals, earlier in the pandemic, the initial shut-down of routine patient care slashed income and drained reserves, pushing many closer to the brink of insolvency. Rural hospital staff foreshadowed that most don’t have the resources to care for many acute COVID patients and would have to do their best to stabilize and transport the worst cases to facilities that might have openings. And treatment models like group therapy and 12-step programs were already challenging or impossible to provide in a pandemic environment. Rural health care stakeholders said resources, such as policies or decision aids, are needed to help rural doctors implement national best practices and navigate disasters such as COVID.

One positive for rural care has been the increased use of telehealth on online platforms—including mental health counseling—that is being covered by insurance during the pandemic. Of course, that only is available to people in rural places that have sufficient broadband coverage. In March 2020, the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) expanded Medicaid telehealth options by permitting telehealth participation from any location and permitting telehealth visits by telephone; both of these changes are permanent.⁶⁰ Providers and patients in rural places express hope that telehealth services for everyone can be continued post-COVID-19. And some specialists, like occupational therapists and mental health professionals, report that the COVID-related move to virtual sessions, while not advisable in all cases, helps them understand patients’ home context and focus on solutions that will work for how patients actually live.

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Virtual Medicine is now
reimbursable –
a good thing,
if you have internet access.
Brown County resident

Wisconsin’s medical schools are working to solve rural physician shortages. Both UW-Madison’s School of Medicine and Public Health (UWSMPH) and the Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW) have created outreach programs to encourage students to practice in rural communities. At UWSMPH, the Wisconsin Academy for Rural Medicine (WARM) provides students with the opportunity to complete community health projects on topics such as farm-to-table programs, concussion awareness for youth athletes, rural drug and alcohol abuse, health literacy, and community disaster drills. In addition, program participants participate in monthly projects at a network of rural hospitals and clinics to focus on a specific topic from a rural perspective. Admission to WARM is offered only to residents of Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin.⁶¹

In 2011, MCW launched two rural campuses and provided 50 additional seats in their program for rural students with ties to the state.⁶² And in 2020, the college launched a special training program for prospective medical students from rural and/or Hmong backgrounds. Through field trips, volunteer opportunities and curriculum focused on specific issues like opioid abuse and the different community leadership roles physicians play in rural areas, the program helps to better address the needs of the state’s underserved communities.⁶³



Population within our 58 rural counties over age 65

Source: 2014-2018 U.S. Census American Community Survey



Population without health insurance (under age 65) within our 58 rural counties

Source: 2014-2018 U.S. Census American Community Survey

Ideas to Explore: health and health care

Rural stakeholders suggested to the Commission:

- **Adopt full Medicaid expansion.** Many expressed hope that the state would expand Medicaid to the full extent possible under the ACA. That expansion would bring significant federal resources into the state to cover health care in rural Wisconsin, would help to stabilize and sustain threatened hospitals, and would provide thousands of families with the basic health care they need to remain productive members of their communities, contributing to the state and rural economy. As one rural stakeholder put it: “Our federal taxpayer dollars are paying for the Medicaid expansion in other states. Society benefits when its people are healthy. This Wisconsin health care policy—lack of Medicaid health coverage expansion—is not good for progress.”
- **Invest in public health to save lives and money.** A sustained investment in health promotion and disease prevention will help Wisconsinites avoid preventable illness, thereby reducing the health care costs associated with treating people after they become sick.
- **Explore ways to expand rural health insurance coverage and health care access.** In addition, find out what other states and places have done to provide or extend insurance coverage to uninsured rural areas and populations—and help spread ideas and adapt what works in rural Wisconsin. Do the same to explore places that are siting community health clinics and behavioral health services in schools so they are easier to access for rural families.
- **Ensure reimbursement for virtual physical and mental health services continues post-COVID.** Virtual services have made it easier for residents in more remote rural areas to receive care and appear to have made some services more effective. Determine if any policies need to be implemented to continue telemedicine on par with what was available during the height of COVID-19 response.
- **Expand career pathways for rural medical professionals and caregivers.** Rural outreach programs at UWSMPH and MCW are solid initiatives aiming to address the state’s physician shortage. Consider how these kinds of programs can be expanded and implemented for other areas of the health care service workforce, like nurse practitioners, physician assistants, dentists and pharmacists. Explore what other states and places are doing to educate, recruit and sustain needed medical professionals and workforce in rural areas—including tailored curriculum, tuition and loan reimbursements, and other incentives, conditions and advocacy. What can be adapted here?

TRANSIT

Rural stakeholders shared how long distance and low density are a defining characteristic of rural living and that: **a reliable car or driver is an absolute necessity for living and working in most of rural Wisconsin.** Rural stakeholders told the commissioners:

Lack of reliable transit keeps struggling families from getting jobs and obtaining basic services in rural Wisconsin. Rural families often find child care, jobs, schools and necessities like groceries and housing in widely separated places. The only viable way to reach them all is to have access to a car. Rural people have few options if they do not own a reliable car or have access to the kindness of family or friends who can drive them. Research on successful welfare-to-work programs shows that one of the largest single determining factors for transition to family economic success is the availability of a reliable automobile.⁶⁴

Public transit is not an option in most rural places. Little public transit service exists in rural communities, and few places host taxi or ride-sharing services. Public rural transit systems don't "bottom-line" well because the equipment, labor costs and distances (and thus fuel expenses) are up against a ridership volume that, due to population numbers, is not sufficient to cover all those costs. The public transportation that does exist tends to be limited to specific purposes, like transportation to medical services. It is not designed to stop at the store along the way, nor will it support commuting to work or college. The Wisconsin Employment Transportation Assistance Program (WETAP) provides funding for employment transportation projects that support low-income individuals. The Wisconsin 2019-2021 biennium budget provided an increase of \$250,000 for WETAP. Additionally, the federally funded Wisconsin Rural Transit Assistance Program provides important training opportunities on various transit topics for individuals involved in providing transit services in rural and small urban areas.

Despite its limitations, publicly supported transit plays an important role for health services. Seniors and people with developmental and physical disabilities often rely on the limited public transportation that is available to get to all their important health care services. State-supported voucher programs for medical transportation do help, but cannot be used for other essential needs like getting groceries. Additionally, finding reliable medical transportation providers can be challenging; one stakeholder shared stories of drivers not showing up for dialysis or chemotherapy appointments.

Rural Wisconsin is a known innovator in developing ways to help striving working families get around. North Country Independent Living in Superior, which works with people with disabilities, recently used a Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WisDOT) pilot opportunity to implement a transportation voucher program that subsidizes willing community members at 51 cents per mile to give people rides to wherever they need to go. The win-win result is the drivers make some money, and the people with disabilities, instead of being isolated, can get out not just to see their doctor, but to get groceries, see family and go to church. The Work-n-Wheels program, operated by the state's network of 16 community action agencies and funded through WisDOT, offers no-interest car loans of up to \$5,000 for qualifying low-income workers who need to purchase a car to get to work. The JumpStart car ownership program, launched in 1999 by West CAP in Glenwood City, was awarded one of ten national Promising Pathways awards from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in 2011. This program has helped place more than 1,000 low income workers into reliable, fuel-efficient, late-model cars.⁶⁶ A final example of transit innovation in rural Wisconsin is the Scenic Mississippi Regional Transit RideSMRT system, which provides several service routes for commuters, elderly and disabled residents, the general public, and tourists in southwest Wisconsin.

Ideas to explore: transit

Rural stakeholders suggested to the Commission:

- Establish a strategic economic roadmap for Wisconsin's forest products sector.** Industry, government, education, non-profits, and community leaders should build off of Wisconsin's 2020 Statewide Forest Action Plan to create a strategic economic roadmap for Wisconsin's forest products sector. Such a roadmap could be modeled off of the Forest Opportunity Roadmap / Maine effort, which is helping the Maine forest economy strategically adapt to changing markets, take advantage of new market opportunities, and drive innovation. The Wisconsin Council on Forestry is well-positioned to help lead this effort.

MAKING A RURAL LIVING AND BUILDING THE RURAL WORKFORCE

Rural family livelihoods and rural workforce challenges surfaced in nearly every exchange with the Commission. Altogether, the clear message to commissioners is: **building a workforce with the skills needed for available jobs—as well as transitioning to jobs that pay a living wage—are linked issues critical to Wisconsin's rural prosperity.** Rural stakeholders told the commissioners:

Contrary to "conventional wisdom," family costs are not always lower in rural places. The assumption that everything costs less in rural areas is just that: an assumption. People often pay more to buy necessities like groceries and gasoline in rural places because local vendors themselves pay more for low-volume orders and higher shipping costs—plus, there is less competition. Rural stakeholders repeatedly raised concerns about housing affordability for the rural workforce, largely because the scarcity of decent housing coupled with the desirability of rural living or vacationing is driving costs up in high-amenity tourist and second-home communities, and also in rural counties where people with urban jobs commute home every night to live and raise their families. Paying off student loans costs the same no matter where you live. Child care, when it can be found, can draw down a major portion of a rural family's budget. In addition, transportation costs more in rural time and dollars because people typically drive further to do the basics in family life—go to school, jobs, church, the store and the doctor. One Commissioner reported towns in her region where 50% or more of the community's families are struggling to make ends meet.

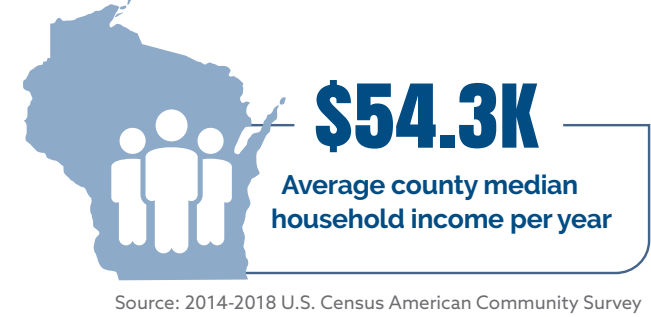
Comparatively low wages make it hard to make ends meet in Wisconsin. Despite the fact that it may not cost less to live in rural, family incomes are lower in rural Wisconsin than in the rest of the state. In 2017, per capita income was 12.6% lower in rural Wisconsin than urban Wisconsin.⁶⁹ And median household

income was 9.2% lower than in urban Wisconsin.⁷⁰ Why is this? Rural Wisconsin does have its share of good jobs with decent pay on the higher rungs of manufacturing, education, health care, government, agriculture and ownership ladders. But the jobs in some important and growing rural sectors, like tourism and outdoor recreation, tend to be lower paid, part-time, and some are by nature seasonal. Rural retail jobs and rural service jobs like child care and elder care or jobs on the lower rung of the health care ladder, whether part-time or full-time, often pay only slightly above minimum wage—and sometimes less. Rural workers often must cobble together three or four jobs just to cover necessities.⁷¹ Overall, since rural wages tend to be lower than urban wages and costs of living are as high or higher, some rural workers can find it hard to meet their basic living needs.⁷²

I hear this all the time: We need good, skilled, reliable people who can perform the jobs that are needed across rural communities.

Rock County resident

Many rural jobs offer no benefits, which also affects family bottom lines, well-being and futures. Some of the larger employers in rural Wisconsin—school districts and colleges, health care groups and municipalities—provide the anchor jobs for families that provide health insurance and retirement savings benefits along with wages. But many of the rural lower-rung jobs in growing sectors mentioned above do not come with benefits. Moreover, rural Wisconsin's jobs are mainly provided by small firms, which are less able to offer health insurance. One Commissioner cited how businesses in their region, the majority of which have nine or fewer employees, are disincentivized from providing employee health insurance because insurance pools generally need 10 or more employees before they significantly lower an employer's health insurance costs. Overall, coupled with low wages, that results in many rural families lacking health care coverage.⁷³ Affordable Care Act insurance plans can also cost more in rural areas where insurers have less room to negotiate prices among competing health care providers.⁷⁴





La Crosse Farmers Market

Labor shortages and skill gaps are significant across rural Wisconsin. At the same time, rural stakeholders told the Commission that rural employers face a constant challenge in finding workers to fill available jobs—from entry-level jobs to those that require higher-end skills and education. Stakeholders reported shortages everywhere, citing a range of potential causes. First, rural Wisconsin's population is significantly older, on average, than in its metropolitan centers. As a result, workers are retiring and fewer youth are coming into the workforce to backfill their jobs—something that's especially true in some key industries like agriculture, forestry and manufacturing. Second, the pay and benefits level is itself an issue; if taking an entry-level or low-paying job does not cover a worker's transportation, child care or other costs of being employed, it sometimes makes no economic sense to take or keep a job. That also helps explain why low-wage workers will jump quickly to another job that pays even a bit more or provides more convenience for them, as well as why lower-rung jobs experience high turnover and go unfilled. The hidden costs of turnover can make it extremely costly for firms; recruiting, hiring, training, lost revenues, lost productivity, and lost institutional expertise all come into play in replacing employees. Research shows that for most positions offering less than \$50,000 annually, typical turnover costs for firms can exceed 20% of a worker's annual salary.⁷⁵ Third, changes in how work is done—especially advances in the use of technology and changes in production processes—mean many jobs require different skills and knowledge than they did in the past. Finding enough local people in the rural adult workforce who have these necessary skills is one challenge; recruiting them from other places to live in rural Wisconsin is another.

Rural conditions can make it hard to retain or recruit workers in rural Wisconsin. As described in above, rural stakeholders report that a major barrier for many adults who want to work is the shortage of affordable, high-quality child care. The lack of decent, affordable housing stock also discourages potential workers from moving to where rural jobs are—and can drive workers with young families to search for a home and job elsewhere. Pay is a special challenge for recent graduates more likely to have solid technology skills; rural college students graduate from college with the same level of debt as metro counterparts, and many in fields like health care and IT find it nearly impossible to service that debt without relocating to a metropolitan area where wages can run 50-100% higher than comparable jobs in rural areas. Other issues, like commute times and specific lifestyle preferences, can also affect whether people will work and stay in rural places.

Broadband access is inextricably connected to workforce skills, availability and job-seeking. Without adequate broadband infrastructure, it is difficult to retain and attract young workers who require internet access to live and work in today's digital world—and that difficulty will only grow. In fact, in today's world, it has become standard practice for many larger employers to require job candidates to *apply* for a job online. Even in parts of rural Wisconsin where good broadband is available, it typically costs more than in urban areas where competition among providers drives the cost down.⁷⁶ Despite its natural beauty and recreational amenities, many people who could and would work remotely from rural Wisconsin cannot and will not because they cannot obtain an adequate internet connection.

Some rural companies are trying to adapt to workforce shortages with automation strategies. While increasing automation may reduce the number of workers a company needs in a workforce shortage situation, the "Catch-22" is that automation requires a more highly skilled workforce. Lacking the necessary amenities to attract or retain a workforce with that talent can increase the difficulty of finding those skills in a small rural labor market.

COVID-19 has disrupted normal labor markets, created a new cohort of unemployed and closed businesses. Main Street and side street firms have laid off workers during the pandemic. Some have closed because of a COVID-19-induced drop in demand for what they do, or because they lacked sufficient reserves to manage through the period. Lack of broadband has significantly affected the ability of rural Wisconsin businesses and workers who can do their work at home to switch to telework. The closing—temporary or permanent—of rural businesses due to COVID-19, and the resulting availability of laid-off workers, might seem to ease workforce shortages, but those impacts are likely to be short-lived. To find another job, laid-off workers may face an excessively long commute or relocate to accept a new job in the industry for which they are trained. In prior economic disruptions, like the recent Great Recession, metropolitan areas recovered first, and many skilled rural workers relocated to these areas when they could not find local employment—which also further threatens the local businesses where they shopped and obtained services, potentially increasing a cycle of closures. Those losses could result in even more workforce shortages and skill gaps as the rural economy recovers.

COVID-19 most significantly affected workers in low-paid and essential jobs. Facing disproportionate risk, rural workers are more likely to have chronic health problems, making them more vulnerable to COVID-19.⁷⁷ Some have resisted returning to work because of the health risks, while others have taken on substantial health risks to continue working. Laid-off workers are challenged to find the financial assistance they need, even via public systems. As one stakeholder told the Commission: "I spend a lot of time helping small businesses and people navigate the unemployment system. A lot of the pre-existing problems in the system are much worse now during COVID-19."

“
It's a challenge, as while we lose the businesses, we still need the workforce for manufacturing, and it is harder to attract residents when you lose the small businesses and cultural diversity that goes with them.
Calumet County resident

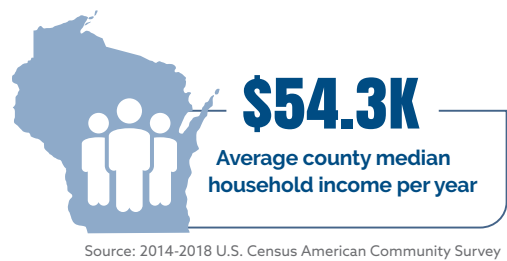
The opioid crisis has negatively impacted rural workforce recruitment and retention. Some rural stakeholders expressed concern for rural workers and businesses that have been impacted by the opioid crisis. Programs such as the Recovery Friendly Workplace initiative administered by Wishope can help to empower employers to hire and support people in recovery.⁷⁸ The Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development recently received a \$5 million grant from the U.S. Department of Labor to partner with five workforce development boards and offer training, career services and supportive services to individuals impacted by the opioid crisis.⁷⁹

State and local programs are helping address workforce shortages in rural Wisconsin. Rural stakeholders highlighted college-based and K-12 programs that draw on a variety of state and local support to build community and industry partnerships focused on training students for local jobs. The UW System and the state's technical and tribal colleges and private universities, with their multiple sites across rural Wisconsin, are a significant, critical and competitive asset for rural Wisconsin's people and industry. Many are working with local communities and businesses to develop industry-tailored curriculum. Likewise, some innovative K-12 districts and schools have programs—like Northwestern High School's Tiger Manufacturing in Maple and the New Richmond School District's school farm, among others—that creatively connect students to local economies and jobs.⁸⁰ (See Learning by doing: Wisconsin students get real-world experience on page 43.) WEDC's Fabrication Laboratories Grant Program (Fab Labs), designed to help grow the talent pipeline in the state, is helpful to these K-12 endeavors. In order to bolster the efforts of the Fab Lab grant recipients, WEDC has partnered with UW-Stout's Discovery Center Fab Lab and technical college partners to deliver professional development to teachers engaged in these dynamic spaces. Additionally, through its federally funded EDA University Center, the Discovery Center is executing targeted technical assistance and applied research to advance entrepreneurs, businesses and communities throughout rural Wisconsin. Some enterprising Workforce Investment Boards are organizing collaborative efforts to provide unskilled workers with training and certification to access available high-skill jobs in rural communities. The Wood Technology Center of Excellence serves as an excellent example of how industry and technical colleges can collaborate to address workforce shortages in a specific industry sector. Another key workforce development initiative in Wisconsin is the Vets Ready Employer Initiative, which helps connect employers with job-seeking veterans—something that's highly important considering that nationally, a quarter of all veterans return from military careers to settle in rural communities. While noting all these good efforts, rural stakeholders told the Commission that the numerous programs supporting workforce development span multiple state agencies, so it can be confusing to navigate.

Ideas to explore: making a rural living and building the rural workforce

Rural stakeholders suggested to the Commission:

- **Invest even more in workforce training programs.** Support career pathways for workers in sectors affected by the pandemic; programs that focus on upskilling workers to meet specific needs of growing companies or sectors are particularly promising. For example, Wisconsin could boost renewable energy workforce development efforts as the state continues to lead in the transition to a clean energy economy. Apprenticeships have been successful models in some industries, such as the farm apprenticeship program with Master Dairy Grazers. Explore what universities, colleges and technical colleges need, in addition to financial support, to retool offerings to better meet the labor demand of local industries across the state. For example, help the Farm and Industry Short Course at UW- Madison's College of Agricultural and Life Sciences evolve as it prepares the next generation of farmers and those seeking employment in agriculture.
- **Identify rural workforce development efforts that work in rural Wisconsin**— and provide peer-to-peer advising. The know-how represented across Wisconsin's successful workforce development efforts can be leveraged and spread more broadly and deeply across the state to address shortages, upskill and retrain workers, and match workers to jobs. Besides those already mentioned, the regional workforce partnership in Wood County—Workforce Central, developed with the support of the In-courage Foundation in response to earlier changes in the paper industry—is another model for how communities, employers, nonprofits, educational institutions and local governments can work together to address workforce issues. As of 2017, it had helped nearly 650 job seekers earn credentials in health care, manufacturing, and customer services, placed youth apprentices in manufacturing firms and served 35 businesses. The State could design a way for community-based rural efforts to learn from one another and provide advice to colleague rural institutions or communities across the state.
- **Help current, potential and laid-off rural workers navigate state benefit systems.** Stakeholders who expressed concern about the plight of low-paid, unemployed and laid-off rural workers—especially as folks in rural Wisconsin grapple with the ongoing impact of COVID-19—advise improving information and methods that allow people to more easily access the existing social safety net, as well as job information. Special effort is needed for rural people who have limited or no digital access.
- **Increase pay and benefits for low-income workers.** Stakeholders offered the Commission multiple ideas for the state to consider that could improve rural family livelihoods. One is to extend benefit programs to all who are in need regardless of immigration status; immigrants are essential workers and if they do not have access to health care and food—for example, via Medicaid and Foodshare—both their families and industries that rely on immigrant labor suffer. Another is to make Medicaid and Foodshare automatic for families under a certain income level so that they automatically receive it without having to address the obstacle of applying, which can be more challenging for lower-income rural people due to travel distances or internet access. Others suggested organizing a statewide effort through Wisconsin community action agencies to provide internet access where available and computers to households in need. Still others are calling for Wisconsin to look at other states and adapt what is working elsewhere to tackle the wage difference between rural and urban environments, to subsidize the wages or improve benefits for low-wage essential workers (such as child care workers), and to increase the minimum wage.
- **Collectively address issues that deter employee recruitment and retention.** Addressing issues that affect recruiting new workers and their families to rural communities can be aided by the state. Other sections of this report offer suggestions related to what might help to increase workforce housing and child care options, affordability and access. Stakeholders suggested that the state could play a role in promoting “remote work” in rural areas where broadband is available. Others call on communities to support staff in a community or regional organization who are assigned to help find work opportunities for the “trailing spouse” of someone who has been offered a good job but needs to make sure their spouse has one too—which can be a dealbreaker in recruiting new families to a community.



How is business and the economy?

BUSINESS AND MAIN STREET

The overwhelming message on business and the economy that rural stakeholders sent to the commissioners is: **small business is big business in rural Wisconsin**. Rural stakeholders told the commissioners:

Locally grown and owned businesses are more committed to local people and community. Rural stakeholders know that locally owned businesses contribute more to the local economy than those that are not—and are more likely to remain in rural communities.⁸² Indeed, nationwide, more than 80% of all new jobs are created by growing businesses that already exist in communities⁸³—and many believe that figure is higher in rural places. Several innovating communities mentioned multiple times to the Commissioners have a thriving ecosystem facilitating the development of mostly small, locally grown businesses. Other rural communities and areas have yet to make the shift from providing attraction incentives to outside firms toward instead building from within, focusing on their own local small businesses, people, assets and resources.

The diversity of businesses in an area is critical. Having a diversity of the type of local businesses—the butcher, the baker and the craft-lager maker—helps attract young and talented residents to live rural areas, contribute to their communities and stay—no matter where they choose to work. Striving for that diversity within rural communities and regions is a priority.

Diverse business owners face unique barriers and challenges. Inequities in access to capital, language barriers and other challenges can make it difficult for minority-, woman- and veteran-owned businesses to get started or expand. The Wisconsin Indian Business Alliance, a coalition of four Native community development financial institutions (CDFIs), is working to support Native economic development through financial sovereignty and accessible lending opportunities. Additionally, immigrants are a solid source of entrepreneurial energy driving small Main Street and Side Street business development in rural communities that are putting out the welcome mat, a trend both in Wisconsin and across the nation.

“
I am a business owner in the area. Economic development in my area has become more inclusive, providing more opportunities to start a business.
Recent immigrant
Marathon County resident



Main Street, Eagle River

Active, creative regional economic development organizations (REDOs) serving rural Wisconsin could focus more at home. The fact that there are REDOs established to cover every multi-county region in Wisconsin is an asset for rural Wisconsin, and one that not every state can boast. The fact that the state's REDOs already have excellent communication and collaboration established between themselves and WEDC is another. Historically, REDOs in Wisconsin have focused much of their attention on business attraction, often bringing state dollars to the table to provide tax and other incentives to companies outside the state. Many rural stakeholders told the Commission those dollars might be better spent at home, strengthening what Wisconsin already has. While attraction remains important, it's time to shift priority and resources toward equipping current small business owners and prospective local entrepreneurs with tools, assistance and coaching that will lower barriers and foster the comprehensive local “entrepreneurial ecosystems” needed for local businesses to launch, grow and thrive.

Cross-community and cross-business collective efforts are strengthening small business in some rural Wisconsin areas. Self-coordinated sales events among small businesses, such as seasonal art tours, craft fairs, and farm and business tours where businesses market their individual products collectively, are tried-and-true strategies on the rise and working in rural Wisconsin. In Viroqua, the Chamber of Commerce banded together to help revitalize Main Street by paying the first month's rent for businesses, organizing events like wine walks and a farmer's market to get folks on Main Street, and working hard to secure grants and partner with neighboring communities.

Rural business development and survival face workforce, technology and transition challenges. Despite their creativity and resilience, small businesses have closed up shop in many rural communities. Many challenges they face are long-standing and well known. For example, as shoppers have moved to big-box stores and now online, business has dwindled for Main Street. Small businesses struggle to compete for high performance workers; their pay and benefits rarely can match that of larger employers. They also are slower to adapt to new technology or to using websites and cloud services to both market products and help manage their work. Other challenges are less obvious. Many stakeholders raised concerns about how to help critical and/or legacy businesses transfer to new local owners, a "generational" issue critical in much of rural America. As business-owners-for-life retire—whether they run the local hotel, a hardware store or a farm—if there is no one in the family or firm who will take over, the business may close. Local people who might be interested may feel they can't manage to purchase the business. Some rural initiatives across the country are playing matchmaker in these cases to facilitate a transition deal to new owners or cooperative ownership that will save the local business.

The UW System and its UW-Extension educators are critical assets for rural business. Rural stakeholders value UW's resources and programs that work both virtually and on the ground to bolster rural enterprise. Stakeholders spoke positively about the [WiSys VentureHome](#), which provides a set of innovation hubs and entrepreneurial resources that communities can tap to help startups, and [UW-Madison's Law and Entrepreneurship clinic](#), which provides free legal services to start-ups and has recently started a rural entrepreneurship program.

Local economic development leadership makes a difference. Consistent, competent, creative local economic development leadership is one key factor that separates some thriving rural areas from some that lag. In some rural Wisconsin communities, constant turnover in leadership by itself is an issue; others would prefer the turnover of long-time leaders who are caught in "how we've always done it" cycles and are not leveraging new ideas and opportunities into entrepreneurial enterprise. In addition, the tight budgets of many rural communities add up to supporting only one part-time economic development professional working for an entire county while some counties have none at all.

“We started an inventors and entrepreneurs club to bring everyone together to help explore ideas and included resources like lawyers and marketing people. We became a feeder system into the state's resources. When you have a mix like that, that's when the rubber hits the road and you see businesses actually able to start up.”

Juneau County resident

Cooperatives provide numerous benefits to the rural economy. There are 742 cooperatives in Wisconsin spanning multiple sectors: agriculture, health care, grocery, credit unions and more.⁸⁴ Rural stakeholders discussed the value of having cooperatives in their communities, from keeping more dollars in the local economy to democratizing participation in governance.

Access to investment capital and financing remains critical to business formation and growth. As in much of rural America, decades of consolidation in the bank industry has weighed on the economies of rural Wisconsin, as branches and local banks have shut down.⁸⁵ Local businesses in low-wealth areas have been hit particularly hard, finding it more difficult to access financing to support day-to-day operations. Stakeholders mentioned several sources of capital that could help. First, provisions of the Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) aim to ensure commercial banks are providing loans to small businesses and minority businesses and are serving underserved communities. But bankers need more guidance about how best to deploy CRA in rural communities and to help rural businesses that are not their typical customer. Second, stakeholders noted that some state economic development financial incentives are targeted at rewarding job creation, a measure that always places small rural businesses with few employees at a disadvantage and creates an uneven playing field. For example, if some new technology allows a business to sell more and thus gives them a better bottom line or the capacity to give an existing employee a raise,

no job was created, but the situation is better. Third, local Revolving Loan Funds (RLFs) are making a difference in making capital available for rural businesses. Many rural regions and communities in Wisconsin have effective local RLFs that are helping support the Main Street economy. Yet, more RLFs, and more capital in them, could bolster small business development even more. Fourth, CDFIs, which, by federal charter, serve underserved areas with small business financing, are options that might be strengthened in rural Wisconsin. Many rural CDFIs across the country and in tribal communities are coupling new and small business loans with business coaching and skill training, services that help ensure the business will survive.⁸⁶ Finally, the Wisconsin Department of Financial Institutions (DFI) allows Wisconsin businesses to raise up to \$1 million from state investors through internet crowdfunding portals, facilitating smaller equity investments by nonaccredited investors.

COVID-19 circumstances are deepening rural business challenges and innovation. COVID-19 has made survival Job No. 1 for many rural small firms. It has accelerated the decline of some rural Main Street businesses while halting, and in some cases reversing, the steady recovery that others had fought so hard to achieve since the Great Recession. COVID-19 has also fueled more intense "shop local" fervor, which has helped. As one rural buyer told the Commission, "There has been an awakening by people as to what they have lost or could lose." Another said:

“We have to do everything we can, especially in rural areas, not to discourage people who had the guts to start a business. This pandemic is going to take out people who have been harmed through no fault of their own. Are there some things we can do at the state level to ease the pain of an inevitable closure or restructuring without burdening them with legal hindrances?”

Dane County resident



Main Street, Marshfield

In other cases, small businesses are encountering unexpected opportunities with COVID-19, moving their sales floor online and seeing business grow. Others, such as restaurants, report adapting and changing their business model, including, by necessity, increasing wages for workers who no longer get tips—a new challenge to their bottom line. Over the long haul, reopening, reviving and sustaining rural businesses post-COVID-19 will demand ongoing state assistance and attention to restructuring and adaptation.

Initial federal COVID-19 responses were not well-tailored to help small business in rural Wisconsin. Rural Wisconsin was at a disadvantage when the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) was first introduced, as the Small Business Administration (SBA) lenders charged with distributing the initial PPP loan rounds were few and far between in rural communities.⁸⁷ By the time CDFIs and other lenders with stronger rural relationships were tapped to dispense PPP resources, many rural businesses were dissuaded and discouraged.⁸⁸ A SBA internal audit found that larger banks failed to prioritize rural needs in part due to the failure of the federal government to provide guidance to lenders on how to reach underserved rural areas, leaving thousands across the country out of the access loop to much-needed capital to sustain their businesses.⁸⁹ Rural stakeholders greatly appreciated the efforts of some local banks and credit unions that worked closely with rural clients and were able to help their communities access PPP.

WEDC acted fast to help rural small business hit hard by COVID-19. Rural stakeholders roundly praise WEDC's leadership and programs to help rural small businesses during COVID. Especially appreciated are the We're All In grants focused on small businesses with under 25 employees that have been unable to access PPP funds.

Ideas to explore: business and Main Street

Rural stakeholders suggested to the Commission:

- **Develop a “rural economic development program” specifically designed for rural communities.** As state programs stand now, there is no cohering, rural-specific programming that will concretely meet the small business needs in Wisconsin's rural communities. Successful rural-specific small business efforts have been seen across the country in North Carolina, Arizona and New York.⁹⁰
- **Sustain state funding, investment and finance for small business development.** Access to financing options and the kind of capital that fills gaps is always critical in rural communities. State government can be a helping hand in providing more support for existing RLFs, CDFIs and other financing or equity programs, or developing them in communities that lack them entirely. DFI's crowdfunding investment exemption is not widely known and targeted outreach would help to educate potential investors and businesses.
- **Support more (and more) innovative—coaching and technical assistance for rural small business start-up, growth and transition.** Rural Wisconsin needs technical assistance and guidance for both new and existing businesses. Maintain support for UW-Extension services. Increasing the availability of organizational development coaches could help new entrepreneurs navigate starting their own businesses; increasing ownership/transition planning resources for business owners looking to sell or retire can better ensure their businesses are not lost to rural communities and can be sustained into the future.
- **Help regions examine the post-COVID-19 economy for change and opportunity.** Several rural stakeholders suggested that the state help scope how rural economies change post-COVID-19. The pivots to e-commerce, new markets and customer bases, demand for different products and services, and increased focus on buying local, among other phenomena brought on by COVID-19, may change the post-COVID-19 outlook. Compare the baseline pre-COVID-19 scenario for rural economies with how these scenarios have changed in one and two years: “What are the industries that rural Wisconsin is in that we weren't before—and where?”
- **Smooth the path for small businesses closed due to COVID-19.** Create a rapid response team, and work with the state Legislature on helpful legislation if relevant, to aid owners with legal reorganization, court backlogs, special acquisition structures, ways to reuse assets, and alternative ownership options.
- **Support the development of cooperatives.** Explore how other states foster the creation of cooperatives, such as offering grants for cooperative feasibility studies, providing tax benefits to employee-owned businesses, creating a center for employee ownership, or setting state procurement goals to support employee-owned businesses.
- **Help reinforce local and regional economic development organizations.** Many local and regional economic development organizations that are helping rural businesses weather the pandemic are at serious risk themselves. Their membership support may fall off due to business closures and local service contracts may do the same as communities juggle budget priorities amid revenue losses due to the COVID-19 crisis. These development organizations, themselves small businesses, may need state assistance to remain anchors in their own communities.
- **Go Big: Organize a “statewide system” that provides rural small businesses with entrepreneurship training and coaching.** WEDC, UW-Extension, REDOs, Chambers of Commerce, CDFIs, community development credit unions, and others are “all in” in some way to spark entrepreneurship and small business growth in rural Wisconsin. How much stronger could they be if they were assembled into a transparent, non-duplicative entrepreneurial ecosystem infrastructure, easy for communities, businesses, and business dreamers to tap into and find the just-in-time technical expertise and resources they need when then need them? Find useful ideas and innovation in individual CDFIs, like Northern Initiatives in the Upper Peninsula, which services some Wisconsin rural areas and small businesses and has developed a one-stop approach (Initiate), conducted online over large distances, to coach its small business loan customers; this coaching includes the development of new business skills, operations and capacity—like cash flow analysis, e-commerce and HR—during their loan period, which strengthens their prospects for success.⁹¹ Another creative statewide and decentralized example spurring rural entrepreneurship is NetWork Kansas and its E-Community Network.⁹²



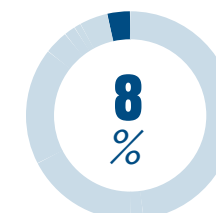
Wausau
Whitewater Park

TOURISM AND OUTDOOR RECREATION

Core to the economies and livelihoods of much of rural Wisconsin, much conversation with the Commission centered on tourism—and its constant companion, outdoor recreation. Commissioners heard this clear message from rural stakeholders: **Tourism and outdoor recreation increasingly drive the economy of many rural regions and are an important contributor in most rural counties.** Rural stakeholders told the commissioners:

Wisconsin's natural beauty, pristine waters, and cultural heritage provide incalculable value both to its rural communities and to urban residents that rest, recreate and revitalize there.

Tourism and outdoor recreation have long served as a bridge between Wisconsin's urban dwellers and the rural communities that steward the state's natural resources. To underline that, during COVID, rural Wisconsin and the Great Lakes region have seen a significant boost in outdoor recreation. With more folks longing to get out of the house, rural stakeholders report that fishing licenses have doubled; boat, RV and bicycle sales have shot up; and participatory activities on trails and waterways are attracting seasonal record numbers. Overall, outdoor recreation activities have a huge economic impact. A recent report by the Wisconsin Office of Outdoor Recreation found that the outdoor recreation



8% of people are employed in arts, entertainment, and recreation, and accommodation and food service

Source: 2014-2018 U.S. Census American Community Survey

economy contributes \$7.8 billion to Wisconsin's GDP.⁹³ In 2019, recreational spending on outdoor activities like boating, fishing, biking and camping increased by about eight percent—the largest growth rate of any sector in Wisconsin's tourism economy—amounting to \$1.9 billion for local⁹⁴ economies. A recent UW-River Falls study assessing the economic impact of Chequamegon Area Mountain Bike Association (CAMBA) trails estimated that trail use generated⁹⁵ \$8 million in economic activity for Bayfield and Sawyer Counties in 2019. Similarly, another study by UW-Madison/Extension on the economic impacts of silent sports (biking, skiing, sailing, hiking, etc.) in the economies of Ashland, Bayfield and Sawyer Counties in 2012 calculated that total trip spending that year totaled \$26.4 million, creating a private sector stimulus of \$14.7 million.⁹⁶ Breathing additional life into this upward trend are re-emerging industries like artisanal brewing, reviving Wisconsin's reputation as a premiere destination for all-things-beer.

Trails are helping to connect rural Wisconsin. Many rural stakeholders are excited about the recent uptick in trail development. Increases in bike or multi-use trails that physically connect rural towns are helping more people visit more rural communities. These trails also help build a sense of regional community and identity between connected towns. Vernon Trails’ multiple trail system, once one mile long, now spans 50 miles. The Boulder Junction bike trails, started way back in the early 1990s with a Department of Natural Resources (DNR) grant, has expanded to more communities and now draws interest for the entire Lake-land area. Developing trails requires a great deal of cross-community cooperation, so, in many areas, enterprising nonprofits have organized to expand bike trails further. One stakeholder reports his community now has a Trail Advisory Group developing a master plan for the county to take a global look at how to use trail systems to grow the local economy. Stakeholders were clear that trails are important not just to tourists, but also to young people and families who live in or may want to move to rural areas—in short, to their current and future prosperity.

Tourism contributes to state and local budgets. The lodging tax, a large portion of which must be reinvested in tourism, creates an “upward” spiral in lodging and tax revenues for rural communities.⁹⁷ Additionally, room and sales taxes help to add revenue to state and local budgets. Rural stakeholders sense that as broadband coverage increases, more people are choosing to live and work in rural Wisconsin where they can also relax and spend their free time outdoors. This can help generate new state and local tax revenue to support the cost of government services when people move to rural Wisconsin from out of state.

Tourism and agriculture interests are connected. Rural tourism and outdoor recreation stakeholders want the high quality of rural Wisconsin’s natural resources and assets to endure, so that communities can rest safe knowing that visitors from all over the world will value visiting its rivers, natural areas and parks. Some stakeholders were concerned about water quality issues stemming from PFAS contamination or agricultural runoff. At the same time, agritourism is growing across the state, and more small farms are recognizing this opportunity to diversify their income streams. The result is new farm relationships with the tourism sector.

So far, COVID-19 has had both good and bad impacts on outdoor recreation and tourism. Early on, rural stakeholders told the Commission, COVID shut down most of Wisconsin’s tourism and outdoor recreation industry. But participation in outdoor activities rose in the summer months across the state.⁹⁸ Moreover, some rural community leaders report a real estate sales burst in high-amenity rural areas, which offers the opportunity to capture more year-round recreation activity and new residents as families relocate from metropolitan areas to work remotely. However, other tourism segments, like indoor conferences and social events that require people to gather, and the lodging that supports them, continue to suffer, and likely won’t rebound until the public has confidence that the worst of the pandemic is past. Dining establishments continue to feel the brunt and face serious closure risk due to COVID, especially those with limited seating.⁹⁹

Stakeholders roundly welcome state investment—and the formation of the Office of Outdoor Recreation. Small state grants and some limited federal funding make an outsized contribution to developing outdoor recreation amenities and growing markets in rural Wisconsin. Furthermore, the Wisconsin Board of Commissioners of Public Lands is hailed for its low interest rates and simple application process for its loan funding. The DNR is also doing its part for rural Wisconsin, assisting with environmental protection, promotion of sports, trail grooming and monitoring the waters. State programs like the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund have greatly helped protect rural natural resources and expand outdoor recreation opportunities. The Wisconsin Department of Transportation is recognized for its help with roads and bridges. The Department of Tourism’s new TRAVEL (Tourism Relief to Accelerate Vitality and Economic Lift) Stimulus Grant Program is using CARES Act funding to help local tourism organizations during the pandemic. The new Wisconsin Office of Outdoor Recreation was created by Governor Evers in the fiscal year 2019-2021 budget and was inspired by similar offices in other states. Stakeholders said having a “front door” to access state resources and information has been beneficial and encouraged the continuation of the Office of Outdoor Recreation.



Apostle Islands, Dog sled races

Ideas to explore: tourism and outdoor recreation

Rural stakeholders suggested to the Commission:

- **Boost state support for outdoor recreation project implementation.** Rural communities and projects often seek funding once they have done some planning, but find that some state funding can only be used for planning. They call for flexibility so that funds typically earmarked for planning can be used for implementation. Support for implementing multimodal transportation projects would help to connect Wisconsinites to outdoor recreation opportunities.
- **Protect the natural resources that drive the tourism and recreation economy.** In 2019, tourism generated \$1.6 billion in state and local taxes and supported one in every 13 jobs in the state.¹⁰⁰ Without the revenue generated by tourism, each household in Wisconsin would need to pay an additional \$687 to maintain the current level of government services available. Protecting the natural resources that are the foundation of these sectors only makes sense.¹⁰¹
- **Recognize and support the potential of rural Wisconsin as a place for urban vacationers to live and work full time.** COVID is shining a light on the vulnerabilities of urban living while simultaneously demonstrating the value and productivity of virtual work to both employers and employees. For rural Wisconsin to reap the windfall of these changes, investments in broadband and critical infrastructure will pay huge dividends for the long-term health of rural communities and their economies.

AGRICULTURE AND FOOD SYSTEMS

Agriculture remains a key driver of the economy and a pressing concern for people in rural Wisconsin. Rural stakeholders were clear in their message to Commissioners: **Agriculture and local food industries are critical to the economic health of not just rural Wisconsin, but all of Wisconsin.** Rural stakeholders told the Commissioners:

Wisconsin is a national agriculture leader—with growing potential in organic and local foods. The nation knows that Wisconsin is America’s Dairyland. With its climate and soil nutrients, the state is an ideal location to graze dairy cattle and produce high-quality milk, cheese and related products. Wisconsin is also known for specialty crops like cranberries, potatoes, snap beans and ginseng. Pertinent to recent consumer trends, Wisconsin is second only to California in number of organic farms, and Wisconsin’s organic industry has been on the rise. Co-ops like Organic Valley, with 400 Wisconsin-based farmer members and 700 employees, give Wisconsin real market strength for producing organic dairy, produce, meat, eggs and feedstocks that are distributed and sold nationwide.

New opportunities are opening up for Wisconsin’s farms and local food enterprises. As one rural stakeholder told the

“
We analyzed our data and found small food business pockets owned by different ethnic groups – it was surprising which areas had diverse business owners. What are the unspoken roadblocks that they talk to each other about? A lot of their businesses have potential, but there is a disconnect on ‘How do I get in and become bankable rather than just survive to feed my family?’

UW program staff

to-table producers across the state. Amish farmers have found success selling local food on the farm and through local auctions



that draw both consumers and retail purchasers. Moves to using e-commerce are also helping farmers and food product entrepreneurs sell their products beyond their communities to reach higher-value markets across the country. Some stakeholders said it’s time to double down on WEDC’s “Made in Wisconsin” efforts and to revitalize the “Something Special from Wisconsin” label to fully realize the potential of a statewide brand. Cooperatives like the Wisconsin Food Hub Cooperative and the Fifth Season Cooperative are helping farmers reach local markets. Innovations are popping up all over, as USDA-certified, shared-use kitchens and food business incubators are helping entrepreneurs prepare new, more and better products for the market. Home-based food business startups are also empowering entrepreneurs and boosting the local economy. Some farms are even diversifying income through the production of renewable energy and carbon capture and sequestration—a market likely to experience significant growth. The Grasslands 2.0 project is a collaborative effort highlighting managed grazing as an economically viable way to boost farmer profitability while also supporting environmental sustainability. Another emerging opportunity is climate-controlled farming, such as

indoor aquaponics, which could foster agricultural production even in far north communities.

Immigrants are a part of the farm and food community but are facing challenges. Immigrants from other countries often

“
In the pandemic we saw small farms all of a sudden providing not just a “nice to have” CSA box, but oversubscribed CSAs. We had CSA farmers without capital to plant enough to take on more subscriptions. We had consumers not knowing where their meat was coming from, and meat producers that had livestock but no local processors.

Vernon County resident

gravitate to doing what they know to make a living, and Wisconsin boasts a number of immigrant farmers. But farming in a new country is challenging. Not only are immigrant farmers likely working on different land in a different climate, most are dealing with different systems in a language they may still be learning. It is hard for them to navigate access to credit and finance and government programs that can help them start and grow their businesses. The

state currently needs someone to provide outreach specifically to immigrant and minority farmers, a resource that used to exist. Helping them will only help rural Wisconsin.

Even pre-COVID-19, things were tough for many Wisconsin farmers. Agricultural prices in recent years that have not met the cost of production have made farming a challenging business. Bankruptcies have been on the rise in recent years, especially for many small- to mid-sized Wisconsin dairy farms. Decades of consolidation in all agriculture worldwide has both reduced the diversification of the state’s individual agriculture enterprises and increased its exposure to volatile commodity markets. Trade disputes with China and tariffs have affected markets for many Wisconsin products, especially cranberries and ginseng. And while new federal support programs have helped out, some products have been left out and unprotected. Centralization has also meant that farmers have limited options to access markets, while big processors often control the prices paid for farm products. Rural stakeholders reported that, unfortunately, a host of obstacles keep farmers from reaching their full potential: adequacy and quality of water supplies limit options in parts of rural Wisconsin; transportation bottlenecks make it harder to market their products for the best price; large farm operators drive prices up; and lack of high-quality market information thwarts farmers from correctly gauging emerging opportunities—resulting in, for example, Wisconsin farmers overplanting hemp before sufficient processing capacity existed to produce CBD oil. In Executive Order #64, Governor Evers called for a special session of the Legislature to consider a package of eight bills that would support farmers in accessing assistance and reaching new market opportunities.¹⁰²

Increasing meat processing capacity would strengthen the Wisconsin food supply system and its opportunities. With the onset of COVID-19, grocery stores quickly ran out of meat supplies, and Wisconsin residents turned to local farmers to find some. This created a significant bottleneck in local meat processing facilities across that state that were already few in number. Many rural stakeholders told the Commission that the lack of processing capacity for livestock was considered a huge barrier to entry for starting a farm or expanding existing operations—even before COVID-19 hit. As one stakeholder put it: “Even small facilities are booked through March of 2021, some through all of 2021.” Another noted: “There’s only one in our area, but it isn’t federally inspected. I would like to get into other markets, such as Chicago—it would open up a lot of opportunities. The closest federally inspected processor is three hours away. This changes the viability of my business. And it’s already hard to stay in business as a niche farmer.”

COVID has added both challenges and opportunities to the plates of rural farmers and local food businesses. Even as supermarket shelves nearly became empty in the first months of COVID-19, farmers faced challenges moving their products to markets near and far along the supply chain. Issues of transportation, processing and distribution clogged the process. COVID-19 outbreaks shut down larger meat processing facilities that did not have a workforce to continue operations. Meanwhile, demand for local foods shot up substantially, leaving many farmers unable to meet it due to short supply and limited or no access to quick-expansion capital. Hmong farmers particularly were negatively impacted by the loss of direct-to-consumer opportunities when farmers markets closed or moved online. Restaurants and food service contracts that accounted for up to 60% of some local producers' markets washed out altogether, leaving those farmers in the lurch. Again, the lack of capacity in small meat processing facilities kept live-stock raisers from direct-marketing animals they had on hand to local food customers. Then in mid-summer, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency, a cost-share program for federal organic certification, reduced the dollar amount of its federal share, an inopportune time for organic growers trying to meet growing consumer demand. Despite these challenges, rural Wisconsin ingenuity continues to surface as some piece together new direct to-supermarket or to-consumer supply chains, including e-commerce sites that help connect to demand and bypass the traditional supply chain disruption.

State grant funds make a big difference. Stakeholders credit the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) for reaching out at the outset of COVID-19, setting up emergency calls to assist farmers and agriculture. The [Wisconsin Farm Support Program](#) and the [Food Security Initiative](#) administered by DATCP and the Department of Revenue were helpful to farmers and the food security network as they grappled with the impacts of the pandemic. Some stakeholders sought more information about programs at WEDC and how they could be used to support agricultural businesses. Others point to the state's investment in the Dairy Innovation Hub, a positive factor so far that may lead to spin-off businesses and new markets.

Tribal agricultural enterprises promote food sovereignty, help to preserve cultural practices and support economic diversification. Farming can be a win-win for Tribal Nations seeking to diversify revenue and promote healthy foods. For example, the Oneida Nation has taken a comprehensive approach to agriculture. The Oneida Community Integrated Food Systems group is a collaborative effort to provide education on the relationship between food and health, boost employment and support youth opportunities. This vision is carried out through a range of enterprises and activities: the Oneida Nation Farm Enterprise, the



Oneida Apple Orchard, the Oneida Farmers Market, and more. The state currently does not have a staff member to partner with Tribal Nations and support their efforts to advance food sovereignty or develop tribal agricultural enterprises.

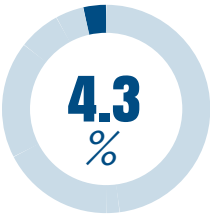
COVID has exacerbated food insecurity in rural communities. Emergency feeding organizations mobilized quickly during COVID to help increase food access, and DATCP's Food Security Initiative provided \$15 million to support these efforts. Rural stakeholders said innovation is important to reducing food insecurity, especially during COVID-19. For example, Marshfield Clinic and Fork Farms are partnering to tackle food insecurity by putting indoor vertical hydroponic farming systems in community spaces and offering education on healthy eating.¹⁰³ Some rural stakeholders said addressing food insecurity among older adults in rural communities is particularly challenging. Before COVID-19, solutions involved both home delivery options like Meals on Wheels and congregate sites in the community. During COVID-19, Meals on Wheels became a lifeline for many older adults who are aging in their homes. One rural stakeholder

said the organization that administered Meals on Wheels in her community permanently stopped delivering meals during the pandemic, cutting off that lifeline to vulnerable community members. Other stakeholders shared ideas on how to reduce food insecurity among older adults after COVID-19, such as partnering with local restaurants to offer older adults a preset menu or partnering with technical colleges that have culinary programs to connect students with older adults and increase nutrition education in older populations.

Supporting consumption of healthy foods is a win-win for farmers' bottom lines and Wisconsinites' health. Increasingly, health professionals are recognizing that food is medicine—that is, eating healthy foods can help prevent diet-related diseases. One example of an effort to address this is produce prescription projects, which allow doctors to prescribe fruits and vegetables to high-risk patients, offering them vouchers to pick up the produce at food banks, farmers markets or other local food retailers. Additionally, medically-tailored meals projects provide a food-based intervention for chronic disease care. Projects that connect food and health can help create new markets for Wisconsin-grown food and address health disparities.

Food waste reduction is a big opportunity across the supply chain. Food waste occurs from farm to fork for a variety of reasons: storage issues, barriers to food donation, confusion around expiration dates, and more. Throwing food away wastes the energy, resources and hard work that farmers put into producing food. Stakeholders are interested in finding ways to recover food throughout the supply chain, which would help to ensure food gets to those who need it most.

The UW-Extension system is essential to agriculture development in rural Wisconsin. Agriculture has become such a knowledge-based business that the information and educational programs offered through UW-Extension are now critical to the health of the sector. Recent disinvestment and reduced budgets in the program are felt by many rural stakeholders who value what UW-Extension provides. The 2020 special session of the Legislature on agriculture included a bill that would ensure there is at least one county agriculture Extension educator in every county that wishes to have one.



employed in agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting, and mining

Source: 2014-2018 U.S. Census American Community Survey

Rural stakeholders suggested to the Commission:

- **Strengthen UW-Extension.** Restore support for UW-Madison's Division of Extension (commonly referred to as UW-Extension) to ensure farm and community access to its critical assistance to the industry, including county UW-Extension educators. Ensure that UW-Extension educators are prepared to advise farmers on the economic risks of climate change and how certain conservation practices can help to mitigate those risks.
- **Invest in gaps that inhibit market development.** Rural stakeholders offered many product and market development ideas to consider—ideas that could benefit from state assistance. The package of bills considered in the 2020 special session of the Legislature on agriculture included support for a range of agricultural market development opportunities, including dairy processing, dairy exports, grazing, value-added agricultural products, and organic farming. In addition, building larger markets for increasingly popular alternative small grains would help producers increase supply, allow for more diverse rotations and create windows for manure application. Investing in in-state processing for hemp would capture more value for rural Wisconsin—and create jobs. Expanding the capacity and number of shared-use commercial kitchens can increase opportunity for farmers to develop and sell value-added items. Investment in additional community-based livestock processing facilities, existing processors that are seeking to expand, and workforce development and training efforts would strengthen the supply chain. As farmers look to diversify their businesses and identify new revenue streams, stakeholders expressed an interest in breaking down barriers between the business community and the agriculture community to facilitate information sharing and coordination.
- **Strengthen the diversity in and of agriculture.** The decades of farm and processor consolidation have rendered the entire sector vulnerable to the volatility of commodity markets and global trade. Many stakeholders think it is time for the pendulum to swing back toward diversity: diverse producers, diverse scales and modes of production, diverse products, diverse sources of revenue and diverse geographies. Support programs for minority farmers, military veteran farmers and beginning farmers. Reinstate the staff positions eliminated in recent times that assisted beginning and minority farmers. A new position dedicated to food sovereignty could partner with Tribal Nations to support their agricultural enterprise work. Additionally, create a new position to focus on helping farm owners learn more about how to use their land to diversify their sources of revenue and engage in activities that mitigate climate change like solar, wind and geothermal energy or soil carbon sequestration. Explore how existing or redesigned financing vehicles, like the use of Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) resources or the design of ag-related small business loans, can be adapted to fill the capital gaps that impede farm diversification. Key to these efforts are technical assistance and farmer-to-farmer information sharing.

Rural stakeholders suggested to the Commission:

- **Help keep farms and farming viable and resilient.** Market development and diversification contribute to viability, but stakeholders had more ideas. Reward farmers for good environmental practices like building healthy soils, renewable energy investments, soil carbon sequestration, conservation practices, groundwater and metropolitan water supply protection, and livestock waste management/waste-to-energy production. These practices could be incentivized through state tax credits for carbon sequestration, discounts on crop insurance premiums for planting cover crops, or a manure management program with financial and technical assistance. On the financing side, consider designing and providing resources to help new farmers cope with rising land and equipment costs, and consider how CRA and philanthropic impact investments might help finance sustainable agriculture, market development, innovative practices and cooperative ownership models. Re-evaluate the agriculture lending tools at the Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority (WHEDA) to make sure they are addressing farmers' financing needs and supporting resilient agricultural operations. Explore other states' agriculture financing offerings, such as the low-interest loan programs through Minnesota's Rural Finance Authority, to identify new opportunities to support farmers. Additionally, better preserve farmland by partnering with local government to increase education to landowners and explore new ways to keep agricultural land in production, including bolstering the Agricultural Enterprise Area Program. Building on the special session of the Legislature on agriculture called for by Governor Evers in early 2020, a comprehensive state farm bill would help to support and coordinate all of these efforts; Pennsylvania passed its first state-level farm bill last year.¹⁰⁴
- **Build state understanding of agriculture and agriculture's understanding of state agencies.** Farm, food and agriculture enterprises interact with numerous state agencies: DATCP, DNR, WHEDA, WEDC, and more. Agricultural stakeholders perceive that well-meaning state staff don't always understand the economics of running these enterprises. Further, the designs of some state information and regulatory systems are not easy for rural communities and food and agriculture businesses to navigate.
- **Support food waste reduction efforts.** Support local composting infrastructure, promote food waste audits in schools, incentivize businesses to compost or donate food, support gleaning projects, and explore other opportunities to reduce food waste across the food supply chain. The state could create a new position that works across agencies to coordinate and drive food waste reduction efforts.
- **Identify opportunities to connect food and health.** Explore successful "food as medicine" projects in other states, such as produce prescription programs or medically tailored meals programs.
- **Utilize the State's purchasing power to support Wisconsin farmers.** Public institutions like schools and hospitals purchase an incredible amount of food. Explore opportunities to ensure public institutions buy local and support Wisconsin farmers. For example, cities and school districts across the country have used the Good Food Purchasing Program, a procurement model that supports five core values: local economies, environmental sustainability, valued workforce, animal welfare and nutrition. Governor Evers' special session on agriculture included bills that would build on the successful Farm to School Program and create a new farm to fork grant program to support businesses, universities, hospitals and other entities with cafeterias in purchasing local food.

Resilience through diversification in Wisconsin's forest economy

Members of the Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin have a unique reason to watch the NCAA Men's and Women's Final Four basketball tournaments each year. Since 1985, those Final Four basketball courts have been constructed from hard maple wood harvested from the Menominee Forest and milled in the sawmill operated by Menominee Tribal Enterprises (MTE), the business arm of the Tribe. "We were able to supply all the wood from our forest of 240,000 acres that we have been managing since 1854. It's the largest sustainable forest in the world," said Nels Huse, Marketing Director of MTE, which has produced forest products since 1908.

Based in the Menominee Reservation in rural northeast Wisconsin, MTE is also supplying wood for eight floors at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, which are postponed for now due to the COVID-19 pandemic. "That's a really big thing for the state and our local community," said Huse.

While operating the successful lumber business, MTE has maintained stewardship over their pristine forest in keeping with Menominee culture and values. "The Menominee made a commitment to harvest timber at a pace that never exceeds the forest's ability to replenish its harvest," said Adrian Miller, MTE's president and CEO.

The forest industry, a key sector of Wisconsin's economy, generates more than \$24 billion in economic output and employs more than 60,000 workers across the state. It has suffered in recent years

from the decline in paper mills and the resulting loss of thousands of paper mill jobs since the late 1990s. MTE's challenges have intensified due to 2020's COVID-induced economic downturn; in the first several months of the pandemic, it lost nearly \$1 million in cancelled lumber sales, including a \$280,000 loss after a large pulp-buying customer shut down permanently.

"We have to think about different ways to come out of this," said Miller. "We are looking at new ventures to diversity our revenue stream and offset the losses due to COVID. We do have hope for recovery."

To develop a fresh plan, MTE is exploring new partnerships with the American Indian Chamber of Commerce, the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation, and colleges in Wisconsin, among others. Loans from the federal government's coronavirus relief program for small businesses—the Paycheck Protection Program—have helped, and MTE is working on an application for a U.S. Economic Development Administration grant.

A labor shortage is another challenge. Working hard to attract new employees and provide training, MTE efforts include outreach within and beyond its community to increase understanding of the Tribe's work. "We took kids into the forest and the mill so they could understand that some trees have to be harvested so that the forest will be healthier—and to help them understand that the forest supplies jobs," said Huse.



FORESTRY, WOOD PRODUCTS, AND PAPER

Historically, Wisconsin's forests have been both a source of wonder and a source of enterprise and productivity. Despite the plummet in paper industry jobs since the 1990s, commissioners heard: **forestry, wood and paper have deep roots in rural Wisconsin's economy and culture, and have new opportunities to endure, employ and contribute to prosperity.** Rural stakeholders told the commissioners:

Forestry, wood products and paper remain a core industry for rural Wisconsin—and the entire state. As of 2017, the forest and related wood products and paper industries were providing more than 63,000 full- and part-time Wisconsin rural and urban jobs, with an annual output of \$24.4 billion in the economy. And that activity is a job multiplier: for every ten jobs in the forest products industry, an additional fifteen jobs are generated in other Wisconsin sectors. Despite significant job losses due to paper plant closures since then, this remains a key industry cluster, largely in rural Wisconsin.

Wisconsin has world-class forestry assets. Many may not know that, hidden in plain sight on the Menominee Reservation lands, is the Menominee Forest, among the world's most impressive examples of a sustainably managed forest. The Menominee are the only Native American tribe with certified and sustainably managed forests. Additionally, it is the only forest that has been environmentally certified by both the U.S. and Canada.¹⁰⁷ After 125 years of logging, the forest has produced 2 billion feet of timber, yet 1.5 billion feet still exist in the forest today.¹⁰⁸ The Tribe and now Menominee Tribal Enterprises (MTE) have stewarded that 230,713-acre resource since 1854. Along with MTE, other large-acreage and small-woodlot owners across rural Wisconsin manage and harvest 10.4 million acres to produce lumber, logs, boards pulp and by-products for the

state and the world.¹¹⁰ Then those products are turned into millwork, furniture, paper, floors—and the entire host of products that start as a tree.

Well-managed working forests are good for Wisconsin and its economy. Forests that are growing are healthy forests; over-mature forests benefit no one.

“Coming out of the Great Recession, when the housing industry tanked, which really hurt the rural areas, three logging processors got together and are producing wood pellets – Great Lakes Renewable Energy – with state and local funding involved. Wood pellet stoves are more efficient, produce less carbon. That worked and gave them an opportunity to have constant business besides logging. It has grown over a short period of time.”

Washburn County resident

Regular wildfire provides a natural source of renewal for forests. Without it, forests become hazards from deadfall, they stop sequestering carbon and they cannot adequately support wildlife. Since communities, homes and businesses are now greatly interspersed with forests, wildfire is fought and extinguished—and sustainable harvesting must do its job instead. In terms of a win-win-win economy/climate/health opportunity, rural stakeholders raised the emerging knowledge that in the northern regions of the U.S., innovations to sequester carbon through forest management practices could be enormously helpful for the

prosperity of the entire industry as well as woodlot owners. New income streams like using “waste” forest byproducts for producing renewable energy and sequestering products could be capitalized into meaningful growth opportunities.



Paper mill downsizing and closings in recent years have cost rural Wisconsin thousands of jobs.¹¹¹ Forestry and paper have gone through dramatic changes in recent decades that cost the state 15,000 largely rural jobs from 2001 to 2016. One cause is the steep decline in demand for high-quality graphic and other paper that many rural Wisconsin mills have been producing. Another is that many locally owned mills recently turned over to private equity firms from elsewhere that have purchased and sold the Wisconsin-based paper companies and their assets, producing a large—and largely negative—impact on our rural communities. This points to the value of establishing and retaining local ownership of forestry and wood products enterprises, whenever possible.

Wisconsin could capture more of the value from its wood products at home. Much of the Wisconsin forest harvest is exported in low-value form—for example, as logs to China and elsewhere. More value could be captured to produce additional Wisconsin jobs and prosperity if more intermediate and final processing was done in the state. An organized effort to develop higher-level supply-chain wood products businesses here in Wisconsin could save export-related transportation and energy costs. The increasing consumer interest in “Made in America” products could generate support to move in this direction. But the forest and wood products industry has become highly technical and the capital cost of entry is high at virtually every level. As with other industries, access to business financing at commercially reasonable rates and terms is critical to the development of any new businesses or the changeover or expansion of existing firms. Notably, the Society of American Foresters-accredited forestry discipline at UW-Stevens Point is the single largest undergraduate forestry program in the nation, and researchers at the Wisconsin Energy Institute and the Great Lakes Bioenergy Research Center at UW-Madison are working to provide replacements for hydrocarbon fuels and numerous chemicals currently derived from petroleum. This will provide additional value to foresters, jobs and economic opportunities for Wisconsinites and local communities, and home-grown renewable replacements for materials that are currently imported.

The industry has significant specialized workforce challenges. The current workforce in forest and wood products is aging, and it has critical skills learned over decades that are hard to replace. MTE told the Commission that they lack enough workers to meet current harvesting demand; retention is difficult because it is a dangerous job and insuring loggers is a challenge. Many components of the industry, like sawmills, have become highly technical computerized operations, where an unskilled operator can destroy thousands of dollars in value or do substantial damage to equipment in just a few minutes. The state needs training infrastructure to replace these and other critical positions in the industry—such as the short supply of logging, lumber grading, heavy equipment operation, and the specialized skill of driving a log truck—as they become vacant.¹¹²

University and college resources can help. The Wood Technology Center at Northcentral Technical College, already a valued resource, is working with county and local employers and successfully training and graduating students to work in the industry; employers have shared machinery with the tech college to aid in this effort. Western Technical College (WTC) and the Milwaukee School of Engineering have also expressed interest in working even more with industry to address workforce issues. Additionally, the Wisconsin Institute for Sustainable Technology (WIST) at UW-Stevens Point is helping to drive innovation in key industries like forestry.

COVID-19 is accelerating some downside change but may also open some opportunity. Rural Wisconsin has already seen direct economic fallout as a result of COVID-19, one of the largest being the closing of the Verso Mill in Wisconsin Rapids, where over 900 workers lost their jobs.¹¹³ North American demand for printer paper and writing paper production has seen its largest demand loss ever this year.¹¹⁴ COVID has further disrupted international supply chains that were already suffering from tariffs and trade wars. One potentially bright note is the construction industry: a surge in home improvements and new home construction brought on by COVID is under way in Wisconsin, as is true in much of the country, aided also by historically low interest rates. However, costs in the industry are also higher due to workforce health protection requirements and an overburdened freight transportation industry.¹¹⁵



Witmer Furniture, Abbottsford

Ideas to explore: forestry, wood products, and paper

Rural stakeholders suggested to the Commission:

- **Establish a strategic roadmap for Wisconsin's forestry sector.** Industry, education, non-profit organizations, and local, state and federal government should work together to create a strategic roadmap for Wisconsin's forestry sector. A roadmap would help to retain existing businesses, identify new market opportunities and drive innovation. The Wisconsin Council on Forestry, a multi-stakeholder group appointed by the governor, held the Governor's Forestry Economic Summit in 2013 to help prepare for and address future industry challenges and opportunities. The Council is already working to advance the state's forestry sector and is well-positioned to help lead efforts around a strategic roadmap. Such an effort could help to galvanize federal resources and promote increased coordination between relevant state agencies, including the DNR, DATCP, WEDC and the Wisconsin Department of Tourism.
- **Examine state law to identify ways to provide monetary value to landowners for forest management and carbon sequestration.** Tax incentives and other tools could provide landowners with the income to invest in forest management practices that otherwise could take decades to provide a return to small landowners. Consider policies to promote healthy and well-managed forests as they provide economic, environmental and recreational public benefits.
- **Boost applied research relevant to the forestry industry.** Stronger connections between universities and the private sector could help the forestry industry address pressing challenges, such as threats from climate change or pests.
- **Create statewide initiatives to help capture more current and future value of Wisconsin's wood products.** A state commitment to playing a part in the future of forestry and wood “products”—including innovation and diversity in the products created (like cross-laminated timber), the renewable fuels and carbon reduction it can help produce, and the new machinery used and created in the state—will help ensure that Wisconsin continues to be part of an ever-changing and growing industry. Dedicate a portion of Wisconsin's economic development resources to understanding and pursuing gaps in the forest and wood products supply chain and opportunities for higher-value production within Wisconsin.¹¹⁶ One example is Ohio's development of an online supply chain database and portal: OhioWoodProducts.com.¹¹⁷ Consider a similar model to make it easier for Wisconsin firms in the industry to source products and find customers in Wisconsin, and for outside customers to locate Wisconsin-based sources of supply.
- **Strengthen workforce training for the industry.** Consider what the state can do to bolster existing college-industry partnerships and/or to expand them to additional locations in the state.

How is our rural “place” doing?

HOUSING

While housing and land use issues are often seen as metropolitan challenges, commissioners clearly heard: ***issues related to housing, land and real estate are holding back rural prosperity across Wisconsin.*** Rural stakeholders told the commissioners:

Decent, affordable workforce housing is a major issue across much of rural Wisconsin. Rural Wisconsinites raised another high priority challenge with the Commission: the significant shortage of rural workforce housing. More and better housing options are critical not just for those who already live there, but for attracting and retaining the additional workforce that rural companies need to grow and fill jobs. Housing cost and availability is a particularly significant challenge for those at the start of their careers and can impede the hiring or drive the outmigration of young skilled workers, especially those who have families or are planning to have one. Availability of decent rental housing is a major issue across much of rural Wisconsin, and homeownership is not always an option if people can’t afford it or there is nothing decent available to purchase.¹¹⁸

High-demand rural areas experience inflated housing demand, pricing local buyers out of the market. Wisconsin’s growing options for tourism and outdoor recreation are attracting people to spend more time and housing dollars in rural Wisconsin. Some higher-growth rural areas, spurred by the expansion of larger employers or their commutability to jobs in urban areas, are also increasing demand for housing. In these cases, buyers from higher income brackets can often outbid local residents for available housing, driving up prices. Those inflated housing values then increase tax bills for local residents, making it harder for them to hang onto their homes. Places like Door County face huge challenges maintaining affordability of workforce housing for families that earn low tourism- and service-industry wages. Those same low wages often make it impossible for local families in high-amenity areas to qualify for financing for the inflated home purchase costs.

The mix and condition of housing is critical. It’s not just one kind of housing that is an issue in rural places. Challenges exist for many types of housing including workforce, senior, seasonal, affordable and rental, housing. Lack of good senior housing options traps many rural seniors in homes that are too big for their needs and too difficult to maintain.¹¹⁹ Additionally, some housing that exists, whether in use or available, needs work—especially the kind of rehab that makes running a household more affordable and safer to live in, like retrofitting that lowers energy costs and improves piping and air flow. As a whole, this situation limits options for younger buyers who need more space for growing families.



Photo Credit: Midwest Solar Power LLC

Energy efficiency is an important and often overlooked component in housing affordability. An “affordable” 100-year-old farmhouse with no insulation is no bargain in Wisconsin winters. Energy efficiency and alternative energy installations, like solar, when incorporated into new housing developments or the rehab of existing housing, make a huge difference in value received by the homeowners. But they are seldom considered in appraisal values for real estate, making it hard to finance improvements and to capture the value when a home sells. The federally funded Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) provides critical assistance to families to help with heating and cooling costs. Stakeholders discussed projects in other states that utilize LIHEAP funding in creative ways to bring renewable energy to low-income households.

Lack of broadband access affects housing values and limits development. Broadband access, again, is a critical limiting factor for recruiting workers and remote workers. Potential rural buyers see quality broadband access as a prerequisite to consider a property. Areas without broadband access often see depressed property values and have limited ability to attract buyers. This is even more true for tourism and second-home markets, since urban residents see access to quality broadband as a make-or-break issue when renting or buying a property.

Workforce housing has “tiers of development.” Workforce housing can come in many forms, each with different potential sources of public investment. Families earning 60% or less of their respective counties’ median incomes can receive support for rental housing through the federal Affordable Housing Tax Credit program

administered by WHEDA. But this program is capped by federal funding limitations, and thus very competitive and generally used most frequently in a county’s metro areas. The second type of worker households, those that earn above 60% of their counties’ median incomes, are not supported by any organized rental workforce housing funding approach offered by the Wisconsin government—a huge gap. Rural stakeholders explained that the private market will not address this gap by itself because of the diseconomies of scale. For the third type of workforce housing—purchase and ownership—once again, access to construction financing and longer-term stabilization financing is hard to come by for developers, given the diseconomies of scale, the borrower credit score requirements and the higher cost of construction in the current labor and materials environment.

Developing and financing rural housing initiatives is tough. Relatively few private investors undertake rural housing developments, believing the returns are greater in metropolitan areas. Thus, rural housing development often requires a set of public or nonprofit partners to join in, which makes things more complex for both single-family and multi-family developments. It also requires assembling a “capital stack” of financing, drawing on, typically, at least six public or private sources. The complexity of putting that number of partners together, along with the financing package, is a time-consuming process requiring lots of expense and technical expertise that can be hard to find in rural areas. Additionally, scoring for the state’s competitive housing finance programs sometimes disadvantages rural communities. For example, while access to child care, full-service grocery stores and libraries are important

amenities, the reality is much of rural Wisconsin does not have nearby access to these amenities. Rewarding points to communities that have a full-service grocery store limits WHEDA programs to only the larger rural communities regardless of the need for or viability of a project.

Rural innovators—and the state government—are working on this challenge. WHEDA offers at least six valuable programs that can help significantly with rural housing development. Through its 2020 allocation of affordable housing tax credits, WHEDA awarded \$4,693,620 in state and federal housing tax credits to 10 projects in rural counties; these projects will create 457 affordable housing units. Rural stakeholders say WHEDA’s Rural Workforce Housing Pilot Program is also a promising step in addressing rural housing needs. The Wisconsin Department of Veteran Affairs oversees three veterans’ care facilities, two of them in rural locations, that provide housing to 1,000 veterans and their spouses. Some rural community organizations and collaboratives are taking on the complexity of housing development with success, even during the pandemic, assembling creative enterprises and forming task forces and consortiums to build workforce and student housing. (For an example, (see *Building energy-efficient, affordable housing in River Fall* page 72.) But leadership capacity and expertise in assembling complex housing development packages remain barriers to increasing housing stock in many rural places. There is a lot that rural communities could learn from each other—but few venues to share their promising practices and lessons learned.

COVID-19 has made almost every housing issue more severe across rural Wisconsin. With COVID-19 came the forced phenomenon of a large proportion of the nation’s companies requiring their employees to work remotely—in most cases, at home. In rural Wisconsin, as across the nation, this adjustment has opened up the potential for more people to move to rural areas, temporarily or permanently, who might never have considered it before. These people are drawn by more space, simplicity and quality of life. Coupled with historically low interest rates, workers leaving metropolitan areas are further driving up sales prices of available rural housing. Materials costs are also rising, due to decreased supply and increased demand, making it even harder to build and improve affordably priced rural housing stock.¹²⁰ Rural places with less pressure from tourism, especially those that have experienced significant business closings due to COVID-19, are seeing housing prices decline—and have newly unemployed homeowners suffering further financially because they can neither afford their mortgages nor sell their houses in a depressed market.

Building energy-efficient, affordable housing in River Falls

Affordable housing is particularly scarce for working families in River Falls, Wisconsin, where affluent residents commuting to the nearby Twin Cities can pay top dollar for a place to live.

A new 50-unit housing development scheduled to open downtown in June 2021 will provide an affordable rental housing option for people earning between 30% and 80% of the county's median income of \$72,111. That's not all it will do; its environmentally-friendly design promises energy savings for residents and cleaner air for everyone in the area.

"This will make it possible for many moderate- to lower-income people to live in the community where they work," said Peter Kilde, executive director of West Central Wisconsin Community Action Agency, Inc. (West CAP), which is managing the development and will own it.

"The project is also very green," adds Kilde. Rising on a once blighted site, the new two-story development, known as the 1300 Residences, will have energy-efficient insulation and advanced heating and cooling technology, with power-producing solar panels that reduce planet-warming carbon dioxide.

"This will provide about \$74,000 a year in energy-cost savings that we can pass along to residents. And it will emit 370 tons less of CO₂ a year than a standard building," said Kilde. "It costs less to operate and offers protection against price volatility in the energy markets. The price of sunlight is always zero."

Across rural Wisconsin, people earning modest wages, often in service sector jobs, struggle to find affordable housing near their workplace, intensifying employers' struggle to find workers. Local organizations, including 16 community action agencies that together provide statewide coverage, are working to fill the need—investing the time and creativity necessary to leverage multiple partners and funding sources.

"Housing development is not for the faint of heart. It's a wild and crazy business," said Kilde. "I have to commend the state for being a really good partner—and most of the local governments too."

In River Falls (population about 16,000), 1,500 new housing units are needed by 2030, according to a city study conducted before the coronavirus pandemic.

Monthly rent at 1300 Residences will range widely, from a \$515 one-bedroom unit to a \$1,435 three-bedroom unit. Ten one-bedroom units will be prioritized for disabled veterans. The development also boosts the local economy during and after construction, providing jobs for area contractors followed by new customers for downtown businesses nearby.

Plus, said Kilde, "The developer fees that our agency gets will help support our other activities that require more funding." West CAP's anti-poverty efforts reach over 25,000 people annually, addressing issues including food security and transportation.

With a price tag of about \$12 million and funding from eight sources, six of which are state controlled and administered, 1300 Residences "is a very complex project," said Kilde. West CAP has partnered with La Crosse-based real estate developer Gerrard Corporation, which has been involved in several public/private projects.



"The funders, equity investors, state agencies and our agency stepped up to share the risk that these uncertain economic times add an extra dimension to," Kilde said. "Everybody realizes that affordable housing and economic activity are needed."

For example, the city paved the way for \$700,000 in tax increment financing, a public method to subsidize redevelopment. To create a "walkable community," a main thoroughfare's speed limit was lowered. The municipal utility company will buy excess electricity from 1300 Residences' solar-energy production.

Much of the state funding came via the Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority (WHEDA), including a construction loan, permanent mortgage, \$1.6 million in state tax credits and a \$325,000 loan through the Capital Magnet Program.

WHEDA also administers the federal Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) program which provided \$3.7 million in private equity through Cinnaire Corporation, based in Michigan. A half million dollars came from the federal HOME program, administered by the Wisconsin Department of Administration. Other funding includes \$750,000 via the Federal Home Loan Bank of Chicago's Affordable Housing Program and \$76,000 from the Public Service Commission of Wisconsin's Focus on Energy program.

"Competition is particularly stiff for the LIHTC funding. It has funded only a few projects in recent years in northern rural communities, although this is improving," said Kilde.

"If you want more green affordable housing in more rural Wisconsin, letting the state know this is a good idea—so it can score these aspects higher on the LIHTC program application—is the way to make it happen," he said. "It also creates an economic incentive for developers."

Pointing to 1300 Residences' projected energy cost savings, Kilde said, "These things pay for themselves in a relatively short period and keep providing that benefit for a long time. It's a win-win situation—from climate change mitigation to the economics of the project to supporting local suppliers and renewable energy installers." The River Falls development "has been quite an inspiration," he adds. "It's by far the greenest new housing project we have done. Seeing that the numbers work, plus the economic benefits and the environmental benefits, made believers out of the developers and impressed the state."

Rural stakeholders suggested to the Commission:

- **Provide assistance to address rural affordable housing needs.** New federal regulations since the Great Recession placed a greater emphasis on income level when qualifying for a mortgage. As a result, many lower-income rural families find it impossible to refinance their current mortgages even though it could save them hundreds of dollars per month compared to the mortgage loans they have been successfully paying for years. Helping these families refinance at today's historically low rates would free up millions of dollars in interest payments that have been flowing out of Wisconsin's rural economy. Additionally, explore successful programs in other states that support down payment assistance for first-time rural homeowners or remodeling aging housing in rural communities.
- **Explore new energy efficiency and alternative energy options for low-income families.** Bringing the "Community Solar for Community Action" model to Wisconsin, which empowers community action agencies to generate their own electricity on behalf of low-income clients, would help to deploy a reliable, clean energy source; reduce reliance on energy assistance programs; and democratize access to solar energy. Discover how other states are using LIHEAP to expand renewable energy to low-income households and incorporate such projects in Wisconsin's next LIHEAP State Plan.
- **Revise the scoring on the state's competitive housing finance programs to get more financial resources to rural Wisconsin.** Some of Wisconsin's affordable housing project financing, such as the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit, are highly competitive to get, and relatively few have gone to rural areas in recent years. The scale and severity of rural housing problems, and the additional challenges in developing a capital stack to support them, would justify allocation of points in competitive award programs. Eliminate or modify requirements that screen out otherwise viable rural projects, such as WHEDA's "small urban" community designation that provides a larger incentive for larger rural communities. Explore adjusting the incentive to provide the largest funding sources for the smallest communities where markets and economies of scale are difficult to address.
- **Consider creating centers of expertise focused on housing development at a regional rural level.** For example, Minnesota's creation of a network of Regional Housing Development Partnerships to provide development expertise in rural communities jumpstarted rural housing development in the late 1990s and early 2000s.¹²¹ These regional partnerships brought a level of development expertise that most individual rural counties or cities didn't have the capacity for on their own, and provided a platform for developing housing in communities that did not have a local nonprofit or governmental housing developer.¹²²
- **Support all forms of rural workforce housing development.** If the pilot is successful, expand and make permanent WHEDA's Rural Workforce Housing Pilot. Explore other incentives, such as new tax credits, to encourage the development of rural workforce housing. Additionally, address the "missing middle" housing gap by considering a state-level funding source that would allow local contractors and developers to more easily obtain the construction and medium-term financing needed to fill this gap.

ENERGY AND CLIMATE

Rural stakeholders voiced how deeply they care about energy and climate issues, and what can be done to improve and safeguard health and prospects for Wisconsin's future. One clear message rang from these conversations: **rural areas can offer energy and climate solutions that benefit all of Wisconsin.** Rural stakeholders told the commissioners:

Rural Wisconsin is already experiencing direct effects from climate change. Climate change is being felt in rural Wisconsin. As in other parts of the country, it has had impact on weather patterns, contributing to flooding and changes in the timing of seasons. These changes already affect state agriculture and food enterprises in ways that disrupt planning and operations, and that are forcing some growers to adjust crops, planting times, harvest times and crop management practices. The Governor's Task Force on Climate Change is currently exploring ideas and developing recommendations for the state to better mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change.

The country is transitioning to renewable energy now. Rural stakeholders noted that private industry is already making the switch to renewable energy, and at an accelerating pace. Vanguard companies like Google led the way by fulfilling early commitments to reduce carbon by powering their servers using solar and wind energy.¹²³ In 2019, a wider host of companies joined them—Walmart, General Motors and Johnson & Johnson, among others—to form the Renewable Energy Buyers Alliance, a trade group purchasing renewable energy and removing additional barriers to carbon reduction.¹²⁴ As the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted shutdowns and declines in electricity consumption, renewables have accounted for a higher share of power generation as a result of their near-zero marginal costs.¹²⁵ And as the pandemic continues into the latter half of 2020, the use of solar and wind plants is anticipated to overpower more costly fossil fuel-burning plants.¹²⁶ Many rural stakeholders want the state to follow suit and re-establish its own leadership in renewable energy, stating plainly: "Wisconsin used to be ahead of the game in renewable energy."

Clean and renewable energy projects can bring new, good jobs to rural communities. Renewable development projects not only can create new jobs for installation and maintenance, but also drive creation of good manufacturing and assembly jobs needed in rural Wisconsin. Indeed, it's not logical to outsource

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Encourage community distributed solar in rural areas. It would use a small amount of landmass, it wouldn't deplete the soil like corn and beans, and it would be locally owned and built. Long-term, it would provide inexpensive energy to our co-ops and municipalities. It's been a gamechanger for rural areas and fits with our independence. And maybe we would have more families who stay in rural areas?

Multiple County residents in conversation

installation and maintenance of equipment. The importance of renewable energy in rural Wisconsin is on the record: renewable energy jobs account for a larger share of overall employment in rural areas than urban areas in 34 states, including our own. Clean energy jobs have grown every year since 2016.¹²⁷ In 2017, Wisconsin was one of four states in the U.S. to have more than 20,000 clean energy rural jobs.¹²⁸ In Wisconsin, renewable energy jobs account for almost 3% of all rural jobs in the state.¹²⁹ Workers in clean energy also earn better wages compared to all workers nationally; mean hourly wages exceed national averages by 8 to 19

percent. Clean energy wages are also more equitable overall; workers at lower ends of the income spectrum can earn \$5 to \$10 more per hour than in other jobs.¹³⁰

Rural Wisconsin is a good place to build solar, wind and geothermal energy installations—though it also raises concerns. Rural Wisconsin has the space for new renewable energy installations that can provide energy for homes and businesses. For larger-scale systems or apparatuses, like wind turbines, installing renewable equipment can generate a diversified source of income for farmers and other landowners. But large-scale projects can also raise community controversy among those who think it mars the landscape, hurts animals or is not the best way forward. As one rural stakeholder who has put forward a proposal to build a solar farm on a large tract of rural farmland told the Commission: "There is definitely a debate ahead."

Rural Wisconsin is a good place to build solar, wind and geothermal energy installations—though it also raises concerns. Rural Wisconsin has the space for new renewable energy installations that can provide energy for homes and businesses. For larger-scale systems or apparatuses, like wind turbines, installing renewable equipment can generate a diversified source of income for farmers and other landowners.



Creating a distributed energy system makes sense for rural economies and resilience. Generating energy close to its use lowers the costs of grid development and transmission. With parts of rural Wisconsin seeing a growing energy demand, rooftop solar is an especially attractive way to increase system reliability and decrease the need for large investments in new transmission grid capacity. Distributed generation via local, commercial and residential solar helped some communities during Wisconsin's 2019 derecho aftermath, demonstrating to rural Wisconsin the importance of energy resilience during times of disaster.

Wisconsin is home to renewable energy expertise being tapped across the Midwest. Among the host of "hidden in plain sight" Wisconsin assets is the Midwest Renewable Energy Association (MREA),¹³¹ birthed right here in a kitchen in Custer, Wisconsin. Founded after a group of friends successfully hosted a 1990 energy fair on a rainy day in Amherst, MREA promotes renewable energy, energy efficiency and sustainable living through training, education and demonstrations across the Midwest—both in person and online. Rural stakeholders said they valued the expertise and assistance MREA had provided to schools and local clusters of residential and commercial installations. Additionally, RENEW Wisconsin is helping to educate and explore innovative ideas that advance renewable energy.¹³² Slipstream is another local asset that is part of an ecosystem of renewable energy resources in the state that can help drive the transition to a clean energy economy.¹³³

I was surprised to learn that solar is now viable in Wisconsin.

Barron County resident

Wisconsin lags behind most other states in attracting investment; stakeholders suggest some state rules and regulations inhibit projects. Wisconsin ranks 35th in the U.S. for solar energy installations, with just \$388.78 million in installed capacity.¹³⁴ This compares to an average of \$8.8 billion in the top 10 states. In wind energy installations, Wisconsin ranks 23rd with just \$1.5 billion in investment statewide versus an average investment of \$13.5 billion from the top 10 states.¹³⁵ Stakeholders noted that there are barriers to entry for non-utilities to enter the renewables market, and that rural Wisconsin could benefit from a regulatory environment that is more attractive to renewable energy.¹³⁶

Billions in investment dollars are available to develop renewables. Nationwide, as the technology becomes less costly and consumers and businesses increasingly demand renewable energy, private and public investment capital available for investing in renewables is on the rise.

Rural Wisconsin has the potential to become a leader in carbon capture and the carbon credit market. Rural stakeholders cited the importance of the growth in the use of capturing carbon ("carbon sequestration") through forest management and agricultural practices like cover crops and grazing. These natural carbon storage strategies are growing in acceptance and use across the state; they can also provide economic benefit for rural landowners. With increased interest in cover crops and soil health, Wisconsin's agriculture industry is well-poised to become a national leader in capturing carbon credits. Markets are developing that monetize it as an ecosystem service through public and private policy. Capitalizing on rural Wisconsin's extensive forests and farming, it makes sense to stay abreast of carbon capture and carbon credits, and how it can generate additional revenue for rural Wisconsin while contributing to global carbon reduction.

Some state rules and regulations deter action on renewables. Current state rules discourage third-party providers from pursuing projects in Wisconsin. Revisions could bring significant investments in renewable energy into rural Wisconsin. Stakeholders noted that neighboring Illinois, Minnesota and Michigan have succeeded in capturing these dollars. One stakeholder explained: "They have cleaner rules and admin codes and are now ahead of us. In those states, a company can lease your rooftop, you receive some of the power, companies receive credit for having this be renewable energy. Third parties come in and build out the larger wind farms. Our rules prevent these third parties from wanting to invest in Wisconsin." Another noted that energy utilities in Wisconsin do not have standard rules governing how homeowners can connect to their local utility in order to invest in their own solar energy system. Currently, these rules differ by utility, complicating this connection. If rules were standard, it would make it easier for installers to complete more system installations.

The sun works the same in the entire state, the renewable energy systems convert the sun's energy into electricity the same way. So the rules energy utilities use to connect to these residential systems should be the same, statewide.

Dane County resident

Ideas to explore: energy and climate

Rural stakeholders suggested to the Commission:

- Advance climate justice solutions.** Climate change disproportionately impacts historically marginalized or underserved communities, including communities that are economically stressed and communities of color. As Wisconsin charts its path towards more climate resiliency, the State should engage and partner with those most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change to address systemic injustice. Efforts in other states can provide inspiration for this work. For example, Washington created the Environmental Health Disparities Map and California created CalEnviroScreen to visually track and illuminate vulnerable communities, which can help to inform policy decisions. In the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act, New York established a Climate Justice Working Group to determine criteria that can be used to identify disadvantaged communities.
- Examine how Wisconsin rules and regulations could encourage more investment in renewables.** Review current state rules and regulations (cited above by the rural stakeholders) to see how they might be changed or flexed to facilitate and encourage renewable demand and adaptation. Explore what leading states have done that is increasing investment. Stakeholders also suggest the idea of requiring all energy utilities to employ a uniform energy buyback for all residential systems—and at the same rate as the utility would charge the customer. Others suggested that multifamily buildings should be allowed to distribute solar energy generated by systems on the roof of the building to the building's residents. Others sought support for community solar projects with subscription or ownership share models.
- Encourage more distribution of renewables to improve rural community, business and household resilience.** Consider policies that will reduce Wisconsin's reliance on imported fossil fuels and get in the renewable lead again. For example, states like Illinois have jumpstarted investments with innovative measures like requiring utilities to provide on-bill financing for residential solar installations to help residents and small businesses access energy efficiency upgrades.¹³⁷ On bill-financing is on the rise across the country for both renewable conversions and energy retrofits; it is an important approach that facilitates lower-income families with affording the process while saving their money and improving their health over the long term.
- Support the statewide effort to transition to a clean energy economy.** Executive Order #38 sets a goal of ensuring all electricity consumed within the state is carbon-free by 2050, and the Office of Sustainability and Clean Energy is leading a statewide effort to create a Clean Energy Plan. Other states have passed measures to advance clean energy goals or projects that can help to inform Wisconsin's transition to a clean energy economy. Virginia recently passed legislation mandating a 100% renewable energy portfolio for the state's largest utility by 2050.¹³⁸ In April, New York passed a measure to accelerate construction of clean energy projects in 2021.¹³⁹ Wisconsin would benefit from robust support for the Office of Sustainability and Clean Energy's pending Clean Energy Plan, which lays out how every state agency can help to drive progress towards a clean energy economy.
- Acknowledge and reward farmers and foresters who provide environmental services.** Interagency collaboration involving DATCP, DNR, PSC and WEDC—along with the state's USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service staff—could explore opportunities to work together to support climate mitigation and adaptation in the agriculture and forestry industries. The state should consider setting aspirational goals, such as increasing cover crop acreage or increasing the number of farms with renewable energy systems, and elevate success stories to increase awareness about the important environmental contributions of agriculture. Support pilots that could provide regional best practices on agroforestry, dual energy systems that incorporate both solar production and crop or livestock production, and other opportunities that both diversify farm revenue and provide environmental benefits.

BUILT INFRASTRUCTURE

While many only think about it when they encounter a problem, rural stakeholders familiar with infrastructure issues painted a disturbing picture in their conversations with commissioners: **aging, inadequately built infrastructure threatens the viability of many rural communities and limits their potential for development and growth.** Rural stakeholders told the commissioners:

Infrastructure serves as the foundation for all other development. Regardless of whether an area’s economy depends on manufacturing, tourism, agriculture, forestry or some other sector, adequate roads, bridges, water and sewer systems, stormwater and flood protection systems, electrical grids, and telecommunications/broadband systems are essential for rural Wisconsin to prosper today and in the future.

Surface and groundwater contamination threaten drinking water quality (and more) in parts of rural Wisconsin. Rural stakeholders had a lot to tell the Commissioners about water. Many rural residents get their water from wells; that water is untreated and doesn’t fall under public supply rules. The water in areas with porous soils and shallow wells is at risk for contamination by agricultural runoff toxins like phosphorous, fecal bacteria, nitrates, herbicides and pesticides—and some

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Surface and groundwater systems are connected, so protecting that asset is paramount to our community – as is stimulating healthy and vibrant agriculture.

There is an increasing perception those two things may be at odds.

Crawford County resident

stakeholders reported community-wide illness from water that did not meet state standards last year. Stakeholders expressed concern about per- and polyfluoroalkyl substance (PFAS) contamination. Clean surface waters are also a prerequisite for much of Wisconsin’s tourism industry. Customers don’t come back (or visit at all) when lakes are known to be unfit for swimming or fishing, or their hotel must post a notice that the tap



water is unfit for drinking—which stakeholders report has happened, and social media reports as well. Residents must install and maintain costly water treatment systems for safe drinking water or septic systems to protect groundwater—a difficult expense for lower-income rural households, especially since workforce housing is in short supply, and the lower-cost housing is most likely to need system upgrades. Governor Evers declared 2019 the Year of Clean Drinking Water and the Wisconsin State Legislature formed a Water Quality Task Force in February 2019, conducting hearings throughout the state. Stakeholders appreciated the attention these efforts brought to this important issue.

Sewer and water systems are aging, often in poor repair, with few resources to help. In much of rural Wisconsin, as in much of the country, sections of community water and sewer systems were built by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in the 1930s, typically with a 50-year design life.¹⁴⁰ Thus today, much of the underground infrastructure across rural Wisconsin communities is long overdue for replacement. But small rural jurisdictions do not have the tax base to fund it. And their ability to use tax levies for this purpose is obstructed by the state restriction on raising levies in communities with no net-new construction. Moreover, most of the programs available to help communities repair and replace water and sewer systems rely heavily on loans rather than grants, and these programs expect residents to repay the

loans through utility bills. The resulting water and sewer bills can be very high, often more than residents believe they can afford, dissuading rural communities from fixing failing systems.

Repeated flooding is a major issue in parts of rural Wisconsin. Heavy rains in recent years, some resulting from the climate-related weather changes being experienced across the country, have caused flooding in several rural Wisconsin areas, affecting both towns and businesses. Inadequate stormwater systems—or no system at all—and dam breaks have contributed to this problem.¹⁴¹ The unfortunate reality in some areas is that homes and businesses have had to be rebuilt repeatedly after these

floods. In March 2020, Governor Evers announced a bipartisan package of bills to address flooding through support for the Municipal Flood Control Grant Program, the Soil and Water Resource Management Grant Program, new local road aid for critical infrastructure, and a new flood insurance tax deduction.

Rural Wisconsin also needs road work—and bridge work. Again, although the situation persists across swaths of rural America, roads and bridges in rural Wisconsin are suffering from decades of deferred maintenance. Taking matters into their own hands, some rural towns are switching from asphalt to gravel roads because they cost less to maintain and hold up better with their soil than asphalt.¹⁴² Road infrastructure funding for construction and maintenance has not kept up with rising costs over the years. An expert stakeholder told the Commission: “Town roads make up more than half (54%) of the mileage in Wisconsin, yet they represent only 5% of the state’s total budget for roads. They are being repaired on a 371-year cycle, typically meant to be a 20- to 30-year cycle. Yet roads are core to the economies of rural communities.” A large percentage of the rural bridges are also structurally deficient or functionally obsolescent, with the same scarcity of resources to repair them.¹⁴³The Wisconsin 2019-2021 biennial budget included \$465 million in new funding for transportation projects, including a 20% increase in funding for the State Highway Rehabilitation (SHR) Program over the previous biennial budget total. The 6-year total funding for the SHR Program is over \$4 billion, with 70.6% going to the construction and repair of highways categorized as rural. The 4-year total funding for the Local Bridge Improvement Assistance Program is over \$171 million, with 71% going to rural projects. Funding for General Transportation Aids and County Forest Road Aids also increased in the 2019-2021 biennial budget. While rural stakeholders applauded recent efforts, communities seek to be assured of sustainable long-term solutions. With COVID, Wisconsin has had fewer cars on the road and, consequently, a decrease in gas tax revenue, putting the state at a further disadvantage to adequately fund transportation needs.

State help with infrastructure is well appreciated, but the problem is much bigger than available resources. Stakeholders appreciate that the state and others are making some progress. DNR efforts to protect water quality, the Wisconsin Fund for helping low- and moderate-income households with septic systems, the WEDC support for flood disaster relief, and Governor Evers’ visit to flooded communities after the 2019 derecho merited mention by rural stakeholders. USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service was noted for helping with dams, as was the UW System’s Freshwater Collaborative of Wisconsin, which was pioneered by the nation’s

only School of Freshwater Sciences at UW-Milwaukee. Finally, stakeholders welcomed the recent commitment to roads by the state Legislature—while noting that the number of applications compared to the number of projects awarded shows just how underfunded roads are.

Ideas to explore: built infrastructure

Rural stakeholders suggested to the Commission:

- Maintain the DSPS Wisconsin Fund.** Stakeholders note that the DSPS Wisconsin Fund (sometimes referred to as the POWTS program) has been a critical tool for ensuring that low-income rural residents have safe wells and are able to protect ground-water by repairing or replacing failing septic systems—assistance that would be hard to find anywhere else.
- Provide towns with tools and a committed partnership to fund infrastructure repair and replacement.** Working with rural places, develop a realistic cost-sharing plan to help local governments maintain critical infrastructure. To have viable economies and grow prosperity for the state, rural Wisconsin’s cities, towns and counties must have adequate infrastructure. Rural Wisconsin is currently without the ability to, by itself, support the cost of repairing and replacing systems. Towns currently are not allowed to raise tax levies to help pay for infrastructure systems unless they have net-new development. Mitigation investments in flood-prone areas is another potential wise use of state resources; it would provide long-term savings, as opposed to repeated disaster assistance for the affected homes and businesses.
- Solicit input from the private sector on transportation needs.** Ensure that the state government is intentionally and regularly conducting outreach to the business community to learn about their shipping needs and priorities.
- Support broadband expansion as critical rural infrastructure.** Explore opportunities to use state infrastructure bonding for broadband expansion. *For additional broadband recommendations, please see page 29.*
- Assist communities seeking to improve water quality.** Continue the State’s efforts to address water quality issues, including support for infrastructure such as designing and constructing wells and septic systems.

EMERGENCY AND PUBLIC SAFETY SERVICES

Rural stakeholders close to fire, emergency, public safety and justice services signaled to the commissioners: ***the volunteer-based fire and emergency service model is becoming unsustainable in parts of rural Wisconsin.*** Rural stakeholders told the commissioners:

For rural communities to prosper, they need good access to emergency services. Maintaining an adequate level of and access to these services is not necessary just for residents. It is critical for tourists. It is a very important “quality of life” factor for people considering a move to rural Wisconsin for any reason, and for anyone deciding whether to leave or remain in rural. For businesses that have high hazard potential, slow response times by emergency services can directly impact insurance costs.

The volunteer-driven model for fire and ambulance services prevalent across rural Wisconsin is under stress. Wisconsin’s rural communities are rightfully proud of their largely volunteer fire and ambulance/EMS services. They represent the absolute best of the all-in/can-do culture of rural America. Most urban dwellers, unless they were raised in rural, are unaware that trained volunteers manage these essential services in rural areas—and could not imagine volunteers staffing these services in their cities. Many rural stakeholders told the Commission, however, that the model is under strain in their communities, with the retention and recruitment of volunteer firefighters and EMS workers suffering. Unlike in the past, when a person would volunteer for 30 years or more, the volunteer pool is shrinking due to aging out and fewer young adults participating. Generational differences, changes in family structure and the need for households to have all adults working at least one job to make ends meet all contribute to the decline in volunteers. Also contributing is a shortage of teachers for the training classes—an impediment because a recent law change requires that certain levels of volunteers need this training, and it is now only offered once or twice a year. In some places, volunteer services have simply shut down, creating dangerous response times for local residents.

Communities are experimenting with incentives to recruit volunteers. Several stakeholder communities are piloting a program that provides student debt relief in exchange for a significant number of years of volunteer service. Others are innovating through the use of fire districts. At the state level, legislation has been introduced to provide financial incentives, such as tax credits, to recruit EMS workers.¹⁴⁴

Non-volunteer options are costly, and communities are hard-pressed to support them. Even for communities that want to hire non-volunteer firefighters and EMS workers, the state limits on local jurisdictions’ abilities to raise levies tie the hands of local governments willing to support the significantly higher costs of non-volunteer systems.

COVID has created some new pressures on existing systems. Since COVID-19, emergency services in rural areas have been under extreme pressure, facing new challenges of protecting personnel, patients, jurors, defendants, prisoners and the public from the risk of transmission.

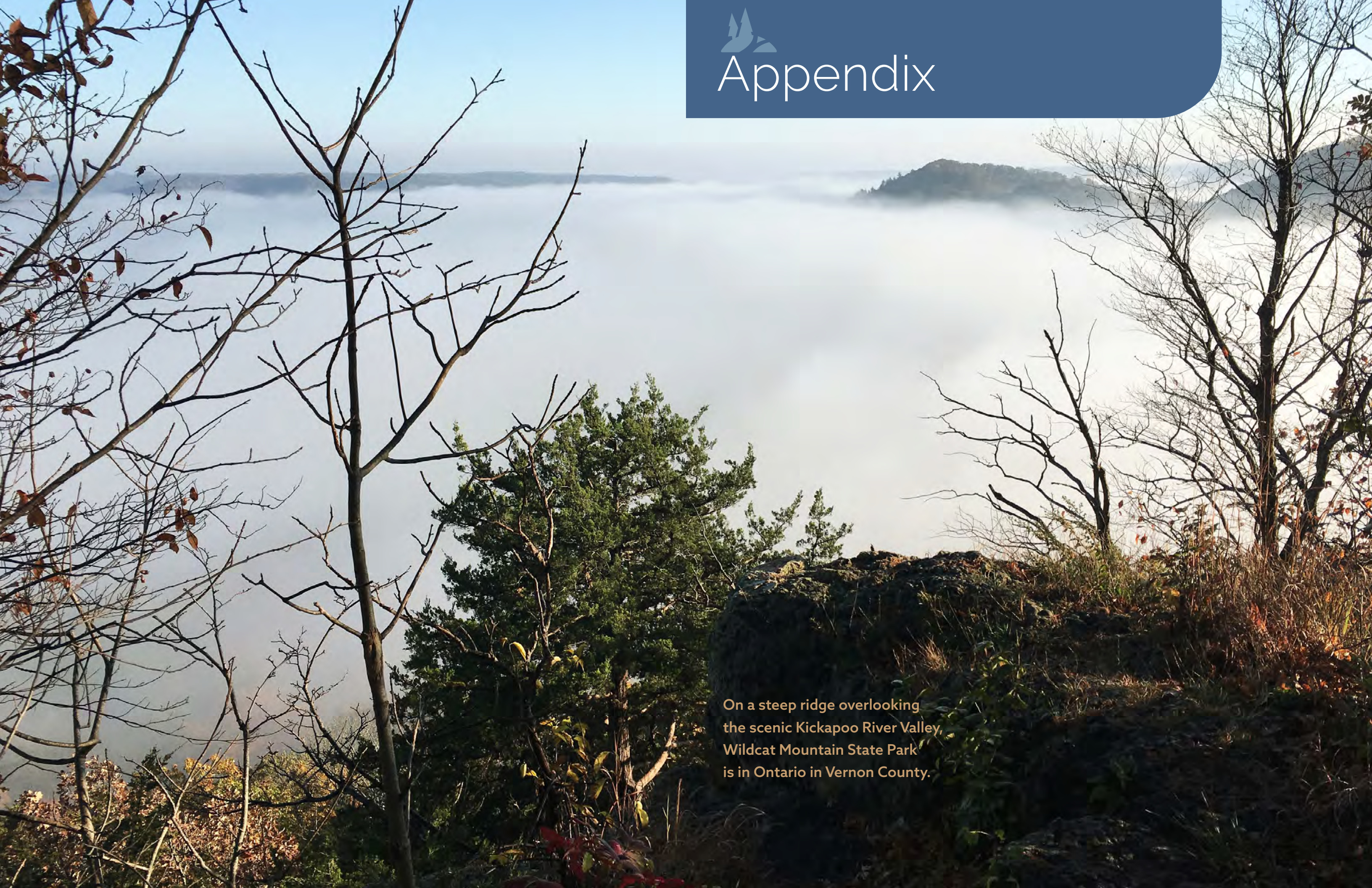
Ideas to explore: emergency and public safety services

Rural stakeholders suggested to the Commission:

- Provide state support for full-time emergency services.** When tourists visit rural Wisconsin, the state collects more tax revenue that can go toward supporting the emergency response system. Providing incentives to serve as emergency or fire personnel, whether in a paid or volunteer situation, is critical to keeping a lasting pool of talent protecting rural communities. Consider state incentives like pension programs for volunteer firefighters.¹⁴⁵ Innovation through solutions like fire districts and financial incentives will likely require legislation and coordination among state and local elected officials, but could be helpful to sustain these critical services.
- Flex the levy limit restriction.** Consider reclassifying fire and EMS services as essential, so that communities that want to seek levies to fund them are exempt from the state’s no-net-development limit on raising levies.
- Increase the availability of training.** EMS and fire training can be costly and is often hard to find, and new laws have increased training requirements. State support would relieve at least one burden affecting local systems in rural areas.



Appendix



On a steep ridge overlooking
the scenic Kickapoo River Valley,
Wildcat Mountain State Park
is in Ontario in Vernon County.



OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

EXECUTIVE ORDER #65

Relating to the Creation of the Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission on Rural Prosperity

WHEREAS, farmers and rural communities are the backbone of Wisconsin, and this state has a proud agricultural history;

WHEREAS, agriculture contributes nearly \$105 billion and over 430,000 jobs to Wisconsin's economy;

WHEREAS, Wisconsin leads the country in cheese and cranberry production, and is the top exporter of ginseng root, cranberries, and sweet corn;

WHEREAS, farmers are facing difficult challenges brought on by a number of factors such as low commodity prices, trade uncertainty, and challenging weather;

WHEREAS, farmers are a significant part of our rural communities: they shop and eat at local business, participate in local government, and their children attend local schools;

WHEREAS, the challenges facing farmers have had ripple effects across our state;

WHEREAS, this administration has taken bold steps to promote rural economic prosperity by making the largest investment in state history in expanding access to broadband internet in underserved communities through the broadband expansion grant program;

WHEREAS, this administration continues to support vibrant rural economies by implementing programs that connect farmers with local market opportunities;

WHEREAS, this administration is connecting the dots by providing historic investments to support rural infrastructure and building strong partnerships by signing into law initiatives like the Dairy Innovation Hub; and

WHEREAS, continuing to partner with and support our farmers and rural communities is vital to the success of the state, and more proactive steps must be taken to support and invigorate the agriculture industry and rural businesses and communities as they face ongoing and developing challenges.

NOW THEREFORE, I, TONY EVERS, Governor of the State of Wisconsin, by the authority vested in me by the Constitution and laws of this State, including Section 14.019 of the Wisconsin Statutes, hereby create the Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission on Rural Prosperity ("Commission") and order the following:

1. The Governor shall appoint the members of the Committee to serve at the pleasure of the Governor. Committee members shall include people representing the interests of the agricultural industry and rural businesses and communities.
2. The Commission shall:
 - a. Hold listening sessions and meetings around Wisconsin to learn about the issues affecting farmers, the agricultural industry, and rural businesses and communities;
 - b. Gather input from stakeholders on current and future challenges facing the agricultural industry and rural businesses and communities, ideas for addressing these challenges, and other means of partnering with and supporting agricultural industry and rural businesses and communities;
 - c. Based on information learned from communities and stakeholders, develop a plan to invigorate the agricultural industry and rural businesses and communities throughout Wisconsin;
 - d. Report to the Governor by December 31, 2020 with the Commission's findings and plan; and
 - e. Provide additional reports and recommendations to at the request of the Governor.
3. The Commission shall be attached to the Department of Administration.



By the Governor:

Douglas La Follette
DOUGLAS LA FOLLETTE
Secretary of State

IN TESTIMONY WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the Great seal of the State of Wisconsin to be affixed. Done in the City of Dodgeville this twenty-third day of January in the year of two thousand twenty.

Tony Evers
TONY EVERS
Governor

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