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Helping rural residents build their future *Thrive Rural program will provide 10 communities with planning assistance and access to grants*

MADISON, WI. FEB. 6, 2024 –Ten rural communities from around the state will get help meeting their biggest economic development needs and planning for their long-term goals.

Under the Thrive Rural program administered by the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC), each participant will have access to up to \$25,000 in grants, two years of technical assistance in planning and grant-writing, and other services typically employed by larger communities.

“Building an economy for all means investing in our entire state, especially our rural communities,” said Missy Hughes, secretary and CEO of WEDC, the state’s leading economic development organization. “Many of our smaller communities have big goals and big ideas, but they don’t have the staff or the experience to connect to the resources that can make those plans a reality. The aim of the Thrive Rural program is to help them build their economic development muscles so their communities will thrive.”

WEDC’s Office of Rural Prosperity will partner with local economic development organizations to work with specific communities on projects related to community development, small business development, housing, and sustainable energy.

The 10 organizations and communities participating in the program include:

- The Vilas County Economic Development Corporation, which is working with the Town of Phelps to acquire and demolish a former hospital on Highway 17 to develop and create a more welcoming gateway to the community, which local officials believe will spur additional development.
- Marinette County and InVenture North, which are working with the City of Peshtigo to attract a high-quality housing development to the city and potentially a second, smaller multi-family housing development in the larger Marinette County community.
- Shawano County Economic Progress, Inc., which is working with the Village of Bonduel to attract more single-family and multi-family housing, revive its aging downtown, and consolidate their municipal offices, which are scattered among multiple sites.
- The Sawyer County/Lac Courte Oreilles Economic Development Corporation, which is working with tribal and county governments, Northwoods Technical College, and other local and tribal educational institutions to develop a business incubator to promote entrepreneurship in the Hayward area and beyond.
- The Kewaunee County Economic Development Corporation, which is working with the cities of Kewaunee and Algoma to promote community development, increase affordable housing, and develop a self-sustaining funding strategy for future growth.

LOOK FORWARD ➤

- The Bayfield County Housing Authority is working with the Town of Bell to increase affordable housing for senior citizens, which may serve as a catalyst to additional residential development in the wider community.
- The Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians, which is working to implement the tribe's economic diversification, redevelop a former casino, and create a mixed-use village incorporating retail, commercial, residential and community development.
- Driftless Development, Inc., which is working with the Village of Gays Mills and Gays Mills Connect Communities to create a public gathering space, consolidate local government and service agencies in one place, and promote additional housing development.
- Wood County, which is working with the City of Pittsville and Pittsville School District to establish a nonprofit community development organization and create outdoor recreation and housing plans.
- The Vernon County Energy District, which is working with area municipalities to pursue local energy generation and improved resiliency for community facilities, including the creation of solar generating facilities and microgrid for emergencies.

Local leaders said they believe the assistance will mark a turning point for their communities.

"We are thrilled the Town of Phelps Site Development Project in Vilas County has been selected by the Thrive Rural Wisconsin Initiative as one of their 10 projects in the state," said Kathy Schmitz, Executive Director of the Vilas County Economic Development Corporation. "This will enable us to have access to customized technical and financial assistance from the Office of Rural Prosperity and WEDC. Overall, it supports our mission to build a stronger Northwoods economy for today, and generations to come."

"This grant holds immense significance for Kewaunee County as it marks our first collaborative effort to address housing challenges," added Ben Nelson, executive director of the Kewaunee County Economic Development Corporation. "The partnership between the Kewaunee County Economic Development Corporation and our community partners is groundbreaking, moving us away from disjointed and competitive approaches. This funding is more than financial support; it's an opportunity to pioneer a transformative model for affordable housing not only in our community, but for other rural areas across the state as well."

"The Thrive Rural program will move a number of important community goals forward," said Michael Hobbs, the owner of Cranberry Creamery & Event City Design in Pittsville and a City Council member. "Our focus areas of improving recreational assets, downtown revitalization, and housing will have a lasting positive impact for residents and visitors for years to come. The technical expertise will enhance already existing local volunteerism and community governance."

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ABOUT THE WISCONSIN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

The Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) leads economic development efforts for the state by advancing and maximizing opportunities in Wisconsin for businesses, communities and people to thrive in a globally competitive environment. Working with more than 600 regional and local partners, WEDC develops and delivers solutions representative of a highly responsive and coordinated economic development network. Visit wedc.org or follow WEDC on Twitter @WEDCNews to learn more.