

BUILDING MOMENTUM FOR VILAS COUNTY

VCEDC Annual Report

VCEDC
VILAS COUNTY ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

2025

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FROM THE BOARD CHAIR



Kate Ferrel
Board Chair

Friends,

The VCEDC's mission—to build a strong, resilient Northwoods economy with an entrepreneurial mindset—has never been more relevant nor critical.

We operate in a rapidly evolving economic landscape with both incredible innovation and real complexity that demands creative solutions. The entrepreneurs and businesses we support, the jobs we help sustain and create, and the quality of life we enhance depend on our strategic foresight and collaborative action.

And as you'll see in this report — the VCEDC is delivering results for Vilas County.

I was honored to step into the role of Board Chair in December, taking over for Jim Tuckwell, who served for nearly a decade as Board Chair. Together with the Board of Directors and Executive Director, Jim steered this organization toward meaningful accomplishments. He set us on course through stewardship and wise decision-making. Thank you, Jim.

As I take the helm, I am guided by three commitments necessary for economic development: **collaboration, innovation, and impact.**

Economic development does not happen in a vacuum. It requires a unified ecosystem of partners, institutions, and community leaders working together. It demands creative, proactive thinking to meet the challenges of a rapidly evolving economy. And it must produce results that are measurable, meaningful, and memorable to the people we serve.

The momentum built in 2025 and on display throughout this report — from broadband expansion to entrepreneurship programs to community redevelopment — is proof that when we focus our energy, extraordinary things happen.

We have the right people, the right mission, and the right moment. Let's build a prosperous future for Vilas County together.

Kate Ferrel



FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



Kathy Schmitz
Executive Director

To our partners, supporters, and community,

2025 was a transformational year for the VCEDC!

Building on the foundation laid in the past decade, we saw some incredible accomplishments that created momentum for Vilas County's success far into the future. Those accomplishments include:

- 86% county-wide broadband coverage (with more to come!)
- Professional consulting for 17 businesses and town projects
- Launch of a first-of-its-kind high school entrepreneurship program in WI
- Midwest ad campaign marketing Vilas County as a broadband destination
- Seven Lunch & Learn sessions for 147 attendees
- Grants worth \$110,000 secured to increase our capacity to support small business owners and aspiring entrepreneurs. In total, \$337,500 in grants since 2020!
- \$2.2M+ in financing accessed by local businesses, with the VCEDC serving as a key connector and resource for the majority of these transactions

These metrics and accomplishments matter, *but they're not the whole story.*

Economic development is not only about data; it's about people, resilience, and the partnerships that make our Northwoods thrive. It's about entrepreneurs daring to dream, students preparing for careers, and communities reimagining their future.

This is what purposeful, practical progress looks like in the Northwoods. Not growth for growth's sake, but growth that builds on itself, equipping entrepreneurs to succeed and strengthening the communities they call home.

I'm excited to share this Annual Report with you and to introduce you to some of the names and stories behind the data.

As I look ahead, the momentum built in 2025 positions Vilas County for an even stronger future — one being shaped right here, in the Northwoods, by the people who call it home. *Thank you for being part of this important work!*

Kathy Schmitz

Vilas County Economic Snapshot

Small businesses define the Vilas County economy.

- A majority of Vilas County businesses employ fewer than 10 people.
- More than 1/3 of businesses employ 4 people or less.



This is a community of small business owners and entrepreneurs who demonstrate a relentlessly "can do" mindset in Vilas County's unique business environment. They are why the VCEDC is so committed to providing personalized support for small businesses.

The top three industries by employment are Government, Accommodation and Food Services, and Retail Trade, industries that rely on a skilled, locally-rooted workforce – and that are essential to our identity as a tourism driven economy.

GOVERNMENT



ACCOMMODATION
& FOOD SERVICES



RETAIL
TRADE



VCEDC Executive Director Kathy Schmitz with Forest Lake Country Store (now Forest Lake Café and Wine Cellar) owners Joe and Keely Rubingh

At the same time, Vilas County faces workforce challenges.

Attracting and retaining the next generation of workers and business owners is a priority for the VCEDC. That's why we're so excited about our program introducing local high school students to entrepreneurship as a real career option (see page 10).

It's also why we're so excited about the momentum we see happening in the county, with many younger entrepreneurs moving here recently to start businesses.

These statistics are why our work matters. The VCEDC wants every Vilas County business owner and new entrepreneur to be supported, encouraged, and connected – because our future prosperity depends on it.

**12,624 RESIDENTS
AGE 55 OR OLDER**

nearly double the
national average for
a region this size

**2,953
MILLENNIALS**

vs. a national
benchmark of
4,902 for
comparable
regions

The VCEDC's 2025 Impact *By the Numbers*

**17 small businesses
& town projects
served**

Free, individualized
consulting — no cost
to the business
owner or township

**\$2.2M+ in financing
accessed by local
businesses**

VCEDC served as a key
connector and resource
for the majority of these
transactions

**147 attendees
across 7 Lunch
& Learn sessions**

Topics: taxes, grants,
e-commerce, Google for
Business

**80+ attend a sold out
Women in Business
Networking Brunch**

Success that led to 2026
funding to formalize and
expand our services for
women in business

**~100 students
created 42
business plans**

First-of-its-kind high
school entrepreneurship
program in Wisconsin

**86% broadband
coverage
countywide**

Up from just 5% in 2020
— projected to reach 96%
by 2028

**7% broadband
Midwest ad
campaign click rate**

outperformed national
average by 7x

**22,000+
video views**

Local business spotlights
on Facebook & Instagram

**\$110,000 in grants
secured for small
business support**

Including WEDC
Small Business Technical
Assistance grant

**\$184,000 in grants
secured for
redevelopment
projects**

Towns of Phelps
and Land O'Lakes

**17 years of tailored
small business
support**

Free consulting that helps
Vilas County businesses
beat the odds

One-on-One Business Support

Starting or growing a business is rarely a solo act, and in Vilas County, no one has to go it alone, turning "I would like to..." into "Yes I did!"

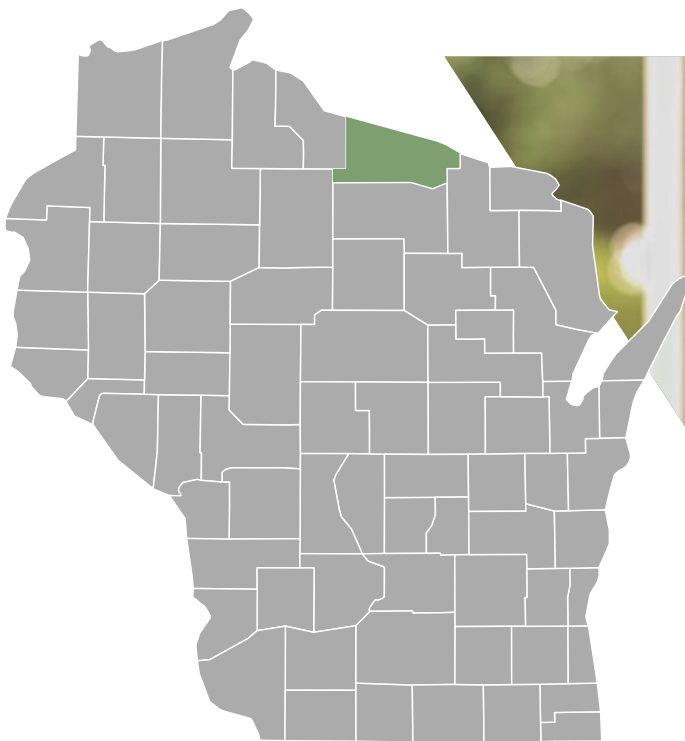
For 17 years, the VCEDC has been the Northwoods' go-to resource for entrepreneurs and small business owners who need a trusted guide: someone to help them think through a business plan, navigate financing, understand their options, and take the next confident step forward. This is the foundation of our work.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 23% of businesses in the United States fail within their first year. Our one-on-one consulting helps business owners and aspiring entrepreneurs beat those odds. From a first-time entrepreneur with a dream to an

established business owner seeking a new challenge, we meet people where they are and help them get where they want to go.

In 2025, we provided professional consulting to 17 businesses, connecting clients to resources ranging from startup capital and grant applications to marketing strategy and financial management.

We are the only organization in Vilas County offering this level of comprehensive, no-cost business support and the impact is life-changing for our clients.



In Their Own Words

Two entrepreneurs share their experience

Finding a home and a new business in the Northwoods

In 2019, I left a demanding corporate career to care for my mother. After she died in 2021, I moved to Wisconsin to be near family and consider what I wanted from my life. I was craving a permanent place to call home after many years on the road for work.

Northern Wisconsin seemed like a dream too good to come true, though some folks warned me about the winters! When I heard about a laundromat in Boulder Junction for sale, I did my research—and some soul-searching. Boulder Junction seemed like a match for what I wanted: a small town vibe with residents who felt like family in a place I could truly love.

But I needed guidance. I found the VCEDC and reached out to Kathy. Kathy counseled me through every stage, reviewing my business plan, working with me through the purchase



process, and connecting me with partners like the Entrepreneur Fund (eFund), along with the CWED and other regional resources.

It is because of VCEDC that I now own The Laundry Room! I don't feel alone. I know where I can reach out for advice and answer any questions that come up, and I am having so much fun in Boulder Junction! This could be the best decision I've ever made.

*Katie Krause, Owner
The Laundry Room
Boulder Junction*

From home-based business to brick-and-mortar

Gratefully Baked is my bakery and donut shop in St. Germain—and the realization of a longtime dream. I started as a home baker. When the orders for my chocolate chip cookies kept coming in, I wanted to turn baking into a real business. But laws regulating home bakers meant everything had to be shelf stable, limiting what I could sell (no cinnamon rolls with cream cheese frosting!)

That inspired me to pursue a brick-and-mortar bakery, and St. Germain felt like the natural choice. My husband, Mike, has loved this town his whole life, and I've been coming here for 25 years. It's our favorite place in the Northwoods. We missed the bakery that was here before, which made St. Germain the perfect place to share our love of baking with!

We had some business experience but had never opened a location before. I reached



out to Kathy at the VCEDC, and that one email changed everything. They guided us through every step of finding and purchasing a property and opening a new business, including licensing, permits, and setting up a website. Every question I had got answered.

The VCEDC's support helped me transition from a small home-based business to a brick and mortar operation with room to grow.

*Amy Hamp, Owner
Gratefully Baked
St. Germain*

Education and Events

Northland Pines High School Entrepreneurship Education Program

In spring 2025, the VCEDC launched something truly new: a first-of-its-kind partnership with Northland Pines High School to bring entrepreneurship education into the classroom.

The program engaged 100 students across seven business classes, each tasked with developing a real business plan from the ground up. Students didn't just learn theory — they pitched their ideas to a panel of local business leaders in a Shark Tank-style competition, with entrepreneur and Leinenkugel's Beer Company CEO Dick Leinenkugel as the featured speaker.

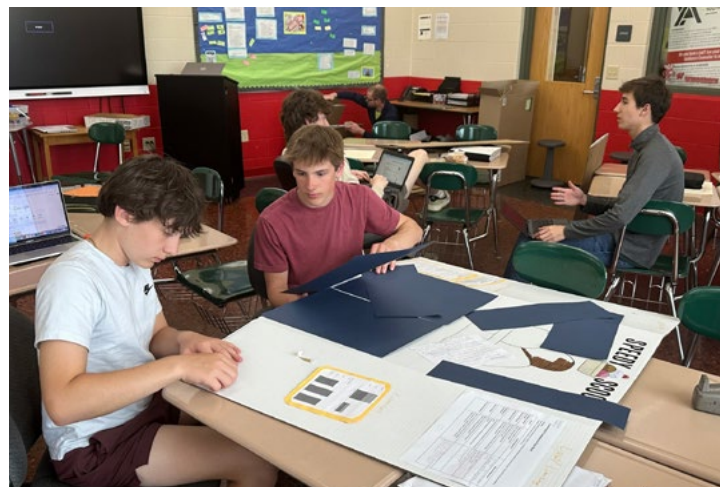
The result? 42 unique business plans and one standout winner.

And the winner is... MEA Boat Detailing!

The three NPHS students behind this innovative business concept didn't stop there — they went on to win the SkillsUSA State Competition, too. Congratulations!

To our knowledge, this is the first program of its kind between a high school and an economic development corporation in Wisconsin. The goal is simple: when young people in Vilas County dream of owning a business someday, they know they have the knowledge and a community behind them.





Education and Events

Women in Business

Vilas County is a place where women lead. 55% of local businesses are owned or co-owned by women, and the VCEDC is working to ensure those leaders have the resources they need to succeed.

The centerpiece of the year was the Spring 2025 Women in Business Networking Event — which completely sold out, drew 80+ attendees, and ended with a waiting list. It was one of the largest VCEDC events in our 17 years.

With private grant funding now secured, this program is now a structured, year-round initiative in 2026 with mentorship, online resources, and expanded education and networking opportunities.



"Wonderful networking event surrounded by women who inspire, inform and educate. Honored to be a part of it – and the brunch was amazing!"

*~Wendy, attendee and
Vilas County small business owner*





Remote Workers: Welcome Home

Broadband makes it possible. Community makes it irresistible. In 2025, the VCEDC hosted our second Remote Worker Meetup to connect the growing community of professionals who've chosen the Northwoods as their place to live and work.

Lunch and Learns

Thanks to a grant from Associated Bank, the VCEDC hosted seven free virtual Lunch & Learn sessions in 2025, drawing 147 total attendees. Each session brought in expert presenters on topics relevant to Vilas County's small business owners:

- Ask the Experts: Business Taxes, Grants & Loans
- Launch Without Fear: The Benefits of Selling Online
- Boost Your Business on Google For Free
- Getting Started with E-Commerce
- Small Business Success: Expert Advice and Resources
- Women in Business: Work-Life Balance
- Simplify Your Work With AI

These sessions make professional-grade business education accessible to entrepreneurs across the Northwoods — no matter where they live, what service they provide, or what they sell.

Community Redevelopment Projects

In 2025, the VCEDC partnered with local stakeholders on transformative redevelopment projects, helping them access planning tools, grant funding, and expert resources that would otherwise be out of reach.

A Community Milestone: Affordable Housing in Lac du Flambeau

With more than half of Vilas County's housing units classified as seasonal or recreational, affordable year-round housing is one of Vilas County's most pressing needs. In May 2025, the VCEDC was honored to participate in the grand opening of Forest Edge Apartments in Lac du Flambeau, one of the few new affordable housing developments in the county in recent years. The milestone was made possible through the collaboration of business, civic, and tribal stakeholders, and VCEDC Board Chair Jim Tuckwell, and Executive Director Kathy Schmitz were thrilled to help guide this important project!

The opening drew coverage from [WJFW News](#), [WXPR](#), and [PBS Wisconsin Here and Now](#), reflecting the significance of this development for the Northwoods.



"When I first joined the Town Board, I didn't fully understand what the VCEDC was. Like many others, I assumed it was simply a branch of county government. But I quickly learned that you're a lean, independent nonprofit — working behind the scenes to support municipalities,

businesses, and economic vitality throughout Vilas County. That work might not always make headlines — but it's absolutely critical."

*Jeremy Ryan, Supervisor,
Town of Phelps*

Town of Phelps: Reimagining a Community Landmark

For years, the former **Lillian Kerr Hospital site in Phelps** sat vacant, a 5.2-acre property overlooking North Twin Lake, full of potential but lacking a clear path forward. The VCEDC stepped in to help change that.

With grant funding secured through the WEDC's Thrive Rural Wisconsin program, the VCEDC engaged two firms on behalf of the Town of Phelps. In 2024, we brought in Redevelopment Resources to conduct a market analysis, which confirmed strong community demand for a mixed-use development on the site. In 2025, we hired Cedar Corporation to develop architectural renderings and a site plan. Those plans were presented to town leadership and the public this year, and the response said it all: "We don't just like it; we love it." The project team is now seeking developers.



(L to R) Eric Fowle, Senior Planner/Grant Coordinator, Cedar Corporation; Jim Cleveland, WEDC Rural Development Specialist; Jeremy Ryan, Town of Phelps Town Supervisor; Kathy Schmitz, VCEDC Executive Director; Jim Tuckwell, VCEDC Board Chair; Jim Rosenberg, WEDC Regional Director and VCEDC Board Member-Ex-Officio



Community Redevelopment Projects

Town of Land O' Lakes: A New Chapter for a Historic Site

Building on the success in Phelps, the VCEDC was selected as one of ten communities statewide to receive a second WEDC Thrive Rural Wisconsin grant, this time to plan the future of the former **Nagel Sawmill site in Land O' Lakes.**

The Nagel Sawmill property is a 160-acre site with significant potential to drive economic growth and enhance quality of life in the Northwoods. The first phase of the grant will fund a comprehensive market analysis to determine

the best path forward, one that respects the site's rich history, honors the natural environment, and creates new opportunities for residents and businesses alike.

The VCEDC is proud to serve as lead applicant on behalf of the property owner, working alongside a team that includes Vilas County Board leadership, the Town of Land O' Lakes, and WEDC regional staff.



(L to R) Jim Cleveland, WEDC Rural Development Specialist; Jim Rosenberg, WEDC Regional Director and VCEDC Board Member-Ex-Officio; Kathy Schmitz, VCEDC Executive Director; Richard Nelson, VCEDC Board Vice-Chair; Carolyn Ritter, Vice Chair of the Vilas County Board & VCEDC Board Member; Dave Mattson, Nagel Mill Site Owner; Carl Radtke, Property Neighbor; Dan Balog, Town Chair, Town of Land O' Lakes



"Receiving this WEDC Thrive Rural Wisconsin grant is an important step in understanding the full potential of the former Nagel Sawmill site. This land has deep meaning for our family, and we see this project as an opportunity to create a legacy that honors its history while contributing to the future of Land O' Lakes. I deeply value the expertise from the VCEDC and our project leadership team, and I'm grateful to be part of such a collaborative, forward-thinking effort."

Dave Mattson
Nagel Sawmill property owner

"From Phelps to Land O' Lakes, these projects represent once-in-a-generation opportunities to shape the future of our region. With WEDC's support, we can thoughtfully plan developments that respect our pristine Northwoods environment while creating new economic pathways for residents, businesses, and future generations."

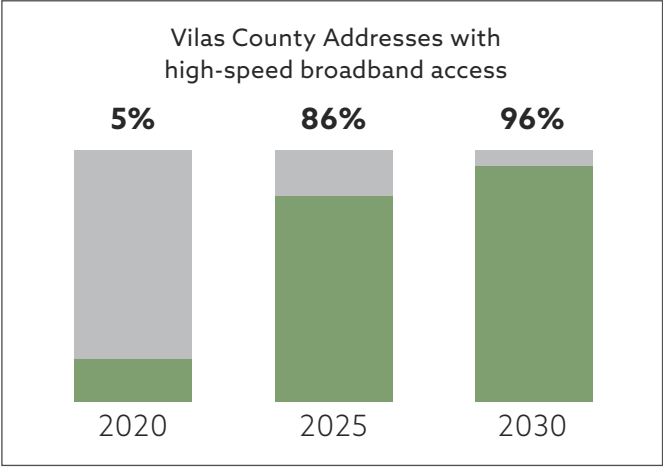
Kathy Schmitz
Executive Director



Broadband in Vilas County

*We couldn't afford to wait for the future.
So we brought it here.*

In 2020, just 5% of Vilas County addresses had access to high-speed broadband. Today, that number stands at 86%, and within a few years, it's projected to reach 96%. This transformation didn't happen by accident. It happened because the VCEDC developed a proactive, coordinated strategy and collaborated with a variety of local stakeholders and Internet Service Providers to bring that strategy to life. Because of our leadership and the partnership of many others, Vilas County is a leader in the Northwoods in broadband connectivity.



Broadband as an Economic Catalyst

Broadband is not only infrastructure. For Vilas County, we believe it's the foundation of a strong economy.



REMOTE WORKERS

High-speed internet enables professionals to live and work full-time in the Northwoods — extending the season, building year-round community, and keeping spending local.



SMALL BUSINESSES

From e-commerce to online booking to digital marketing, reliable broadband opens doors that were previously closed to rural businesses. Connectivity is now a competitive tool.



SEASONAL RESIDENTS

Broadband keeps seasonal visitors here longer — and increasingly, converts them into year-round residents. That's economic growth that compounds over time.

"Northwoods Charm. Big City Connection."

Broadband coverage alone wasn't enough. The VCEDC knew that to attract remote workers and entrepreneurs, people had to know Vilas County was connected.

In June 2025, thanks to funding from Incredible Bank and a private foundation, the VCEDC launched the "Northwoods Charm. Big City Connection." Broadband Destination Ad Campaign to promote real stories about how high-speed internet has transformed Vilas County from a vacation destination into a thriving hub for remote workers and entrepreneurs.

The campaign delivered. Streaming ads drew a 7% click-through rate, far above the national average of under 1%. That's more than 7x the industry benchmark.

The campaign featured authentic stories from remote workers and entrepreneurs who have chosen the Northwoods as their home base, rather than just their vacation spot. These are residents who live here year-round, shop locally, hire locally, and invest locally. That's economic impact that compounds.

Voices from the Connected Northwoods

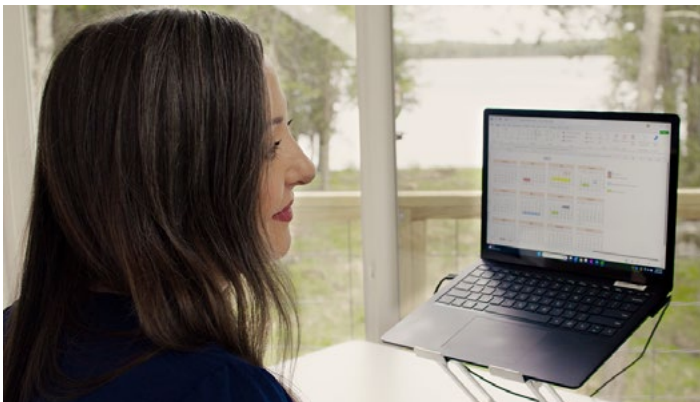
What does broadband mean in real life? For remote workers Vanessa and Lee, it meant freedom: the freedom to choose where they live without sacrificing their careers.



Northwoods Charm. Big City Connection.

A Vilas County EDC Initiative.

Click on the photos below to hear Vanessa and Lee's stories!



2025 VCEDC Business of the Year



"Andy's Pontoon Saloon is proof that bold ideas can transform a community. Andy took an out-of-the-box concept and turned it into a destination that not only entertains but also strengthens our local economy. By drawing thousands of visitors annually and energizing Eagle River's Main Street, Andy's has become an engine of growth for Eagle River and beyond."

Jim Tuckwell
VCEDC Board Chair

"Being named Vilas County EDC's Business of the Year in our second season is an unbelievable honor. It reflects the passion and heart that my incredible staff pours into what we do every day. I'm grateful to the VCEDC and to our community for the support and enthusiasm they continue to show us."

Andy Lichtfuss, Owner,
Andy's Pontoon Saloon

Andy's Pontoon Saloon



Andy Lichtfuss opened Andy's Pontoon Saloon with a concept that fits the Northwoods perfectly: a family-friendly, dog-friendly indoor/outdoor beer garden and pizzeria built around a pontoon fire pit and stage, right in the heart of downtown Eagle River.

The result is a restaurant that has become a genuine gathering place. Locals and visitors come for live music, trivia nights, beer garden yoga, a run club, and a casual atmosphere that reflects the lakeside culture Vilas County is known for.

In its second season, Andy's earned recognition as Wisconsin's best new downtown business from the WEDC. For Eagle River, an anchor business like Andy's matters beyond its own four walls: it draws thousands of people downtown, keeps them there, and introduces them to the shops and restaurants around it.

Congratulations to Andy and the team at Andy's Pontoon Saloon!

2025 Financial Partners

The VCEDC's work is made possible through the generous investment of partners who share our commitment to a thriving Northwoods economy, including but not limited to:

Vilas County
Anonymous Private Foundation
Associated Bank
Balestrieri Family Foundation
Eagle River Light & Water
Grandma's Toy Box
Headwaters State Bank
IncredibleBank Foundation
Lake of the Torches Casino
Laketime Management
Lac du Flambeau Business Development Corporation
Marshfield Clinic
MidWisconsin Foundation Legacy Fund
Norvado
People's Bank
Pukall Lumber Foundation
Ripco Credit Union
Town of Manitowish Waters
Town of Phelps
Town of Boulder Junction
Town of Cloverland
St. Germain Thrift Shop
St. Germain Women's Service Club
Schindelholz Dental
Sunrise Hospitality
Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC)
Wisconsin Public Service Foundation

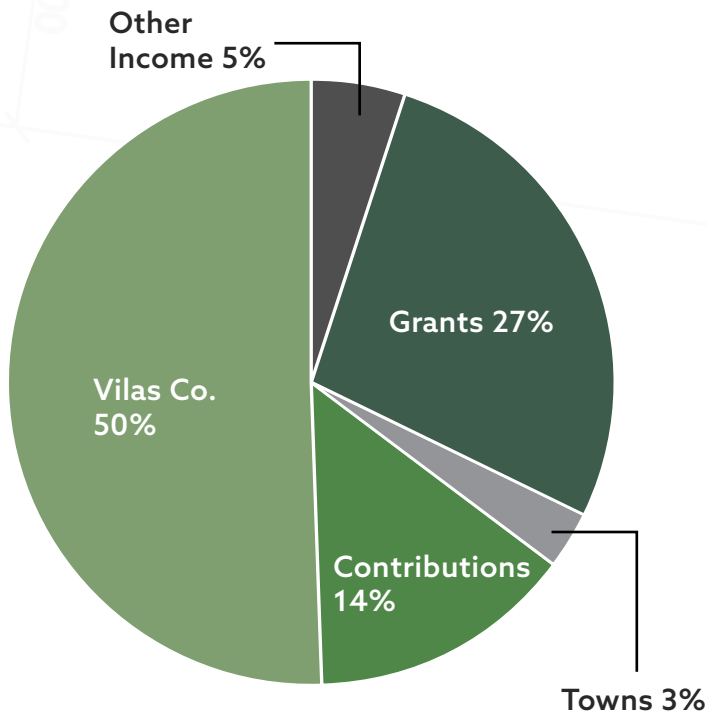
A special thank you to individual donors who invest in Vilas County small businesses through their support of the VCEDC.

Thank you!

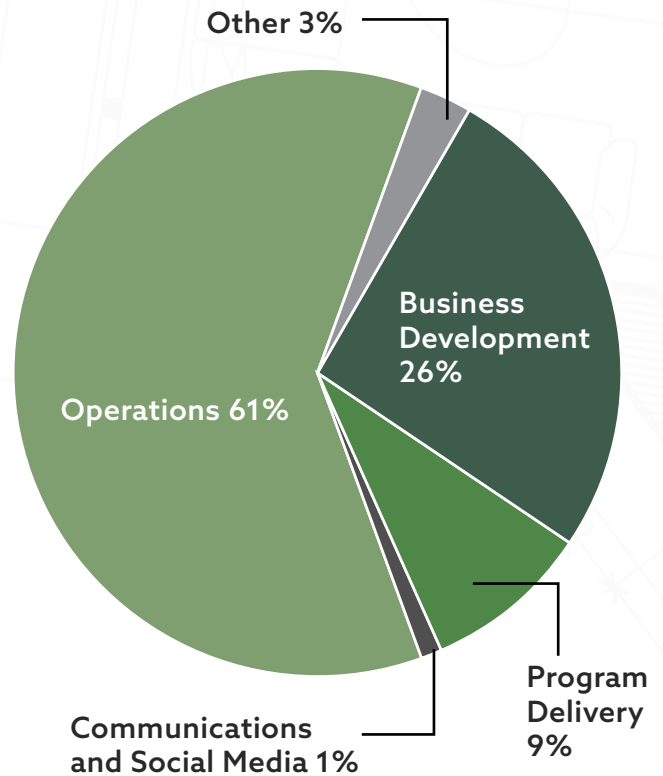


Financials

Income



Expenses



Support the VCEDC

At the Vilas County EDC, we make a measurable impact on the small business owners and entrepreneurs who drive our economy, and we can't do it without our community of supporters. You can support our mission to build a stronger Northwoods economy:

- Make a monthly donation to sustain our work year-round.
- Sponsor an educational or networking event.
- Share your expertise as a speaker at an educational event.
- Mentor a Vilas County business owner.
- Spread the word about the VCEDC across your social and professional networks.
- Show up: attend a VCEDC event and connect with the small business owners who make Vilas County thrive.

Join us in making a positive difference in Vilas County in 2026! Contact Kathy or visit VilasCountyEDC.org today to get started!

2025 Leadership

The VCEDC's impact is inseparable from the dedication of the volunteer leaders who guide it.

Our Board of Directors brings together business owners, community leaders, and longtime Northwoods residents, each giving generously of their time and expertise. Behind every broadband milestone, every redevelopment project, and every entrepreneur we serve is a committed Board that is making sure the VCEDC's mission to build a strong, resilient Northwoods economy with an entrepreneurial mindset becomes a reality.

To learn more about the experts leading the VCEDC, visit VilasCountyEDC.org/leadership.



Executive Director Kathy Schmitz

Board of Directors

Board Chair	Jim Tuckwell
Vice Chairman	Richard Nelson
Treasurer	Jon Chamberlain
Secretary	Ty Erickson
Directors	Kelly Cooper
	Emerson Coy
	William Keeler
	Patty Krarup
	Noah Lottig
	Erin McCormick
	Peter Mouw
	Carolyn Ritter
	Roger Wolff
Ex-Officio	Kate Ferrel
	Jim Rosenberg

Are You a Small Business Owner or Aspiring Entrepreneur? The VCEDC is here for you!

Whether you're starting your first business, growing an existing one, or exploring a new idea, the VCEDC offers personalized, one-on-one support at no cost to you.

We can help you:

- Develop or refine your business plan
- Navigate financing, loans, and grant opportunities
- Connect with resources for marketing, operations, and more
- Find the right partners, mentors, programs, and experts for your stage of growth

You don't have to figure it out alone. That's what we're here for.
Get started today at VilasCountyEDC.org/resources.

CONNECT WITH US

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VILAS COUNTY ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

