



GROWING CONNECTIVITY COUNTY-WIDE



PIERCE COUNTY

— MEANS BUSINESS —

DREAM. GROW. THRIVE



Written by Jessica Ferlaino

For many, Pierce County, Wisconsin is the perfect rural escape from the bustle of the city. Each day, the region attracts visitors from nearby Minneapolis-St. Paul, Madison, Milwaukee, and beyond, who come to share in the fantastic quality of life.



 **Lauren Highfill**
Executive Director, Pierce County Economic
Development Corporation

What makes Pierce County attractive is the strong connectivity residents enjoy—a tight-knit community, a local economy where small business thrives, and the infrastructure and resources that tie these together and make it a wonderful place to be. With amenities and attractions that are characteristically unique—including access to Class 1 trout streams and the pristine natural settings they afford—and rich in agriculture and the fruits of that labor, Pierce County has developed a distinct flavor and culture that it loves to share. »

► Collaborative development

Sharing is key to local prosperity in Pierce County, and the Pierce County Economic Development Corporation (PCEDC) plays an important role as a conduit between people, organizations, services, and resources to maximize the impacts and benefits to the community.

The organization's mission statement, "Advancing Pierce County through growth and collaboration," is the driving force behind its efforts to support local businesses through relationship building in the interest of a strong and sustainable economy. While the goals may vary with the ever-changing needs of the county's communities, the PCEDC remains agile, adaptable, and responsive.

"We embrace forward-thinking ideas and creative solutions to foster economic vitality and resilience," says Executive Director Lauren Highfill. "What we truly need is the ability to adapt, which is reflected in our mission statement and overall

strategy. We believe in the power of partnerships: working together with local businesses, community leaders, and regional allies to drive meaningful long-term progress."

Spearheading many of these initiatives, the PCEDC is what former Executive Director Joe Folsom refers to as a "tool and a resource that people can turn to as they pursue their dreams and goals, whether of community development or economic development. That's a key component of both economic and community development; it's being that connector, that resource they can turn to. If we don't know [the answer], we usually know who we can turn to to find the answer," he says.

A community-builder at heart, even though he has formally stepped away from his role as Executive Director, Folsom continues to serve the community, sharing his knowledge and experience to continue building the relationships and connectivity he helped bring to life.





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Connectivity matters

Growth in new and existing partnerships has blessed Pierce County with results beyond expectations. A recent \$7.96 million investment in broadband infrastructure has brought two-gigabit service and connectivity to the region, a boon for residents and businesses alike.

“Our academic institutions work very well together on workforce initiatives.”

Together with Pierce Pepin Cooperative Services, Bevcomm, and Spring Valley Telephone, the PCEDC established a public-private partnership, and since 2021, over 7,000 locations have gained access to high-speed internet, which is hugely impactful for a rural community. While a few isolated spots remain in the unincorporated areas, the investment demonstrates the power of partnership.

Pierce County is also strengthening regional connections with neighboring Dunn and St. Croix Counties—united in their belief in collaborating across borders in the interest of regional prosperity—as well as with educational

institutions like the University of Wisconsin – River Falls (UWRF), Chippewa Valley Technical College, and Northland Community & Technical College.

“Our academic institutions work very well together on workforce initiatives and, in particular, helping students get to where they want to be,” says Folsom of the work being done to ensure that the next generation of workers is equipped to carry the torch. ►►





► Supporting small business

Small businesses are the heart of Pierce County's economy, which is why they remain a priority of the PCEDC, which offers resources and support to help these operations find success and scale, where necessary. One such success is Ellsworth Cooperative Creamery, which has been in operation since 1910. The creamery produces over 80 varieties of specialty cheeses under the Ellsworth and Ellsworth Reserve brands, as well as private label offerings that are available worldwide. Supported by 200 patron families who are committed to producing dairy products of the highest quality, the business perfectly represents the agricultural foundation of the community and its economy. Its retail store brings in a quarter of a million visitors each year.

This strong agricultural foundation is turbocharging the growth of agritourism in the region, which includes a growing farm-to-table sector. From unconventional offerings at local farms and orchards to The Chef Shack in Bay City, which is a James Beard-nominated restaurant that brings modern French cuisine to the region, there is truly something for everyone to savor.

It doesn't stop there, either. Behind the scenes, other investments are being made to strengthen the agricultural foundation of the community—once again, through improved connectivity, but in this case, connectivity to markets. An old sand mine in Hagar City has been repurposed by ALCIVIA into a new state-of-the-art rail loading grain terminal that offers a 110-car capacity and 17,000 linear feet of existing track that will be reconfigured to support more agricultural inputs like fertilizers.

The new facility will offer marketing opportunities to grain producers by opening access to domestic and export markets and arbitrage. Equipped with a shuttle loading facility on the BNSF Railway, this now equips ALCIVIA with access to three different Class 1 railways, UP and CPKC included.

Companies like these turn to the PCEDC and its available resources to grow and scale for success. This extends not only to the business supports in place, but also the resources available for those looking to call Pierce County home.



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Creating community

To these ends, the organization has developed a housing toolkit to support homebuyers and help developers navigate regulatory process and financing options and expedite housing developments. Folsom explains, “there’s a section for aspiring homeowners, and that’s the piece that no one has ever pulled together. It’s been distributed across the 10-county region and it will be featured in our regional housing forum coming up in June.”

The organization also helped the Village of Ellsworth establish its Community Development Authority, which is taking the lead in redeveloping the old middle schools into a housing project to meet community housing needs, an effort that originated from a visioning process led by the Chamber, one that will have a lasting impact on the community.

Through the tireless efforts of the PCEDC and its many partners to grow opportunities locally, Pierce County has prioritized quality of life and wellbeing by balancing those needs with future development to foster sustainable economic and community development that preserves the rural charm of the area as it grows.

“As you get deeper into Wisconsin, there’s agritourism everywhere,” Highfill notes, “but I would say what’s specifically

unique about Pierce County is where we’re situated, close to the Twin Cities and other more populated areas while still maintaining that rural identity,” which the community holds so dear.

The goal of the PCEDC moving forward is to continue to adapt its goals and strategic directives to meet the rural needs of Pierce County. The team will be reviewing its progress and adjusting as needed to remain agile and responsive, aligning objectives with the current economic environment.

Noting that the demographics of the county will shift significantly over the next several years, the PCEDC and its partners will continue to utilize relationships and resources to maximize the collective benefit for all, always asking, as Folsom does: “How can we help our communities and businesses achieve their goals and aspirations in a sustainable way that respects the culture and character of the community?”

The answer to that is to continue to bring people, organizations, resources, and ideas together to strengthen the connectivity of the community, keeping the opportunities coming and prosperity flowing. ■

Content Developed by Steve Finn

