





Pierce County's location in western Wisconsin offers the best of both worlds – rolling countryside, pristine waterways, a small-town vibe and boundless outdoor recreational opportunities, while only 30 minutes away are the amenities of a large urban area. And the best part is that Pierce County is developing a sustainable economy through a balanced approach and workforce development.

*A Balanced Approach
Leads to*

a **SUSTAINABLE
ECONOMY**



Written by Margaret Patricia Eaton

With a population of 45,000, Pierce County, WI covers 592 square miles and borders on Minnesota on the south and west. Flowing through it is part of the Saint Croix National Scenic River way, a federally protected system of river ways including a portion of the 252-mile long St. Croix River on the Wisconsin/Minnesota border.

River Falls, the most populous city at almost 12,000, is situated on the banks of the Kinnickinnic River, a class one trout stream with the south fork of the river running right through the city, dividing the campus of the University of Wisconsin-River Falls into two sections.

Other Pierce County communities include the county seat of Ellsworth (population 3,000) surrounded by rolling countryside, home to some 450 dairy farm families who sell their produce to the Ellsworth Cooperative Creamery and its infamous cheese curds; Prescott (population 4,000) located at the confluence of the St. Croix and the Mississippi; and at the southern end, on beautiful Lake Pepin, the tiny village of Maiden Rock, home to fine craft shops, including Cultural Cloth, a social enterprise supporting women in 25 countries and one of the county's small business success stories. Taking advantage of the ►►



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- ▶ excellent growing climates, vineyards and small wineries are dotted along some of the winding country roads.

If this description of Pierce County brings to mind a 19th century mid-West rural idyll, cut off from the 21st century, think again. There are a total of 4,243 businesses successfully operating here, representing agriculture, utilities, construction, manufacturing, and retail and trade sectors, while transportation is not limited to country roads; U.S. and State highways crisscross the county. From River Falls, it's just 30 minutes to the Minneapolis-St. Paul-Bloomington Metropolitan Statistical Area (population 3,946,533 in the 2017 census), where all urban amenities are available, including an international airport.

Joe Folsom, Director of Pierce County's Economic Development Corporation, believes his role is encouraging new business growth and expansion, fostering an entrepreneurial culture, maintaining a balance with the community's infrastructure, workforce, housing needs while preserving the rural character of the county and its agricultural base, which has long been a mainstay of the economy. He stepped into this role this past December and says his background as District Director for U. S. Small Business Administration in Iowa where he worked for 10 years and his earlier experience in Minnesota in rural economic development gives him some unique perspectives.



"My background covers a broad spectrum of small business, entrepreneurship, community infrastructure, financing, and housing, as well as working with agricultural producers and farmers," says Folsom. "It gives me a fairly diverse set of tools and experiences to bring to this role and enables me to connect people, organizations, and communities with tools and resources that in turn enable them to realize their goals and aspirations," he shares.

"I believe that Pierce County is a unique combination. We've got small farms that are reflective of our mid-west culture, history and rural character and yet in 30 minutes you're in one of the nation's larger metropolitan areas. We've got clean, fish-filled rivers and lakes, clean air and the health benefits that go with that, and there are other advantages, such as housing costs that are significantly lower than if you were close to the heart of St. Paul."

He goes on to say that, "Our focus is on small business development and retention and workforce development, but at the same time we want to be positioned to take advantage of relocation opportunities of larger businesses should they arrive."

While Folsom says he's not chasing large corporations to relocate at present, "we want to be in a position to make it happen." This past January, for example, DMC, a contract manufacturer for cosmetics and skin care products, did relocate from the Minnesota side of the river to Prescott, "because they needed an additional area for expansion, so that was a recent opportunity that took place. Two years ago, UNFI, a national distributor, built a distribution center for organic food products and that feeds into the agriculture nature of the region."

But development, he cautions, needs to go hand-in-hand with the strengths that are already present. "We want sustainable growth along with farmland preservation, and we need to do this in a balanced fashion. We can't grow significant job numbers without growth in housing and we have to manage the educational and infrastructure piece; they need to move together and do it in a manner that respects the interests and the values of the community," he says.

"To be frank, I think chasing really large businesses is not the most efficient use of our resources and I think the greatest potential for economic growth comes from growing small to medium sized businesses — the kind of place that would have 10 to 100 employees. Helping them move to the next level is going to have a greater economic impact than trying to chase down companies that might bring in 150 or more jobs, because the potential for us to do that is less than being able

to bring our resources to small businesses and help them grow, overcome challenges and realize their aspirations.”

Folsom goes on to discuss the opportunities from an educational and workforce development perspective. “We’re a small county, rural in nature, that’s true, but we also have a state university (in River Falls) with an enrollment of 6000 in undergraduate and graduate programs and a branch of the technical vocational college (Chippewa Valley Technical College). You put that together with other post-secondary institutions not far away and we have an opportunity to take advantage of educational resources in developing and attracting a quality workforce,” he explains.

“I’m looking at what we can do to foster the economic environment for the county. We have students coming here for their education, most from outside our community, so how can we develop relationships and opportunities with them so when they finish their education they are inclined to take advantage of these opportunities and stay here?”

He mentions Momentum West, a regional economic development organization that works with University of Wisconsin campuses to create internship opportunities within the community. One example of an internship opportunity is the University of Wisconsin-River Falls Horticulture Program where students majoring in horticulture can prepare for careers in landscaping, fruit, vegetable, turf grass, interior plantscaping, golf course, woody ornamentals, greenhouse and other related industries.

Schools are also getting involved, through the Career Cruising program for middle and high school students to identify pathways and to connect businesses in those paths. Ellsworth High School, for example, has just opened a fabrication lab which will give students an opportunity to get exposed to STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) related opportunities. “Hopefully their interest will be piqued, and they can move on that career path by virtue of having had some exposure to different skills and trades in high school,” Folsom says. “It won’t happen tomorrow, because it’s one of those things that take time.”

One thing that will help business start-ups save time is the Economic Development Corporation’s comprehensive website which includes a Business Toolbox. Among the offerings is a Business Start Up Checklist which begins with the most basic steps — finding a location, checking zoning, drafting a comprehensive business plan and financing, through to filing permits and learning about tax responsibilities. It will also direct interested persons to the Small Business Development



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Center in River Falls, part of a statewide network supporting entrepreneurs and business owners through no-cost, confidential consulting and targeted education training programs. Registration is now underway for the Fall 2018 Entrepreneurial Training Program.

Also available on the site are “Conversations with Joe,” down to earth advice that addresses such topics as how small businesses can obtain microloans, how to impact profits through effective use of accounting software and the business of arts and culture.

Concludes Folsom, “Economic development requires a deliberate approach. It’s a process and processes may take a little time to ingrain into the culture, grow and bear fruit. One thing I’m passionate about is building relationships, bringing people together and helping them realize their vision. I like facilitating and connecting the right pieces to make things happen and empowering people to take what’s offered and run with it,” he says.

“Some of this takes a little longer, but in the end, it will be sustainable. That’s what has to happen. It doesn’t happen overnight. You can steal someone’s business and get them to relocate in your area, but when the incentives are gone, someone else will steal them away. But if a business is locally owned and locally grown, with roots in the community, then it will be sustainable.” ■



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