

# PIERCE COUNTY MEANS BUSINESS TOURISM EDITION



2026 QTR 1



# TABLE OF CONTENTS



---

## IN THIS EDITION: TOURISM'S IMPACT ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

**01**

**Featured Article: Strategic Shift - Why Tourism is Economic Development (Page 4)**

---

**02**

**Heritage Tourism - Great River Road Visitor & Learning Center (Page 6)**

---

**03**

**Travel & Explore - Crystal Cave (Page 9)**

---

**04**

**Getting Around - Backroads of Pierce County (Page 12)**

---

# Director's Note

## Strengthening Our Core: Expanding the PCEDC Mission

**Dear Member Investors and Community Partners,**

As the PCEDC moves forward with our 2026 Strategic Plan, our commitment to the fundamental pillars of economic development remains as firm as ever. We continue to dedicate our daily energy to the critical work of housing availability, infrastructure improvements, community development, and robust business expansion and retention. These are the foundations upon which Pierce County is built.

However, a truly resilient economy requires a holistic approach. To complement these traditional interests, I am pleased to announce that we are officially adding Tourism as a strategic priority to our mission.

We recognize that tourism is often the front door to economic development. A visitor today is a potential resident, entrepreneur, or investor tomorrow. By integrating tourism into our strategic planning, we are not shifting our focus—we are widening it.

To lead this effort, the PCEDC has established a new Tourism Committee and an Advisory Board composed of local, regional, and state-level experts. Our goal is to move towards a unified countywide approach to Tourism. We will begin by optimizing our digital presence on state and regional platforms to ensure our local businesses receive the premier PR and advertising they deserve.

By linking our traditional development goals with a sophisticated tourism strategy, we are ensuring that Pierce County remains a competitive, vibrant place to live, work, and visit. Thank you for your continued investment in our shared future.

**Lauren Highfill**  
Executive Director, PCEDC

# FEATURED ARTICLE:

## THE STRATEGIC SHIFT—WHY TOURISM IS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

**In the evolving landscape of regional growth, the "front door" to a community is often its tourism industry. When a visitor spends a weekend exploring our river towns, dining at a local bistro, or visiting a family-owned orchard, they aren't just tourists—they are temporary taxpayers contributing to our infrastructure and potential future residents or entrepreneurs.**

### **Strengthening Our Core Pillars**

Recognizing this critical connection, the Pierce County Economic Development Corporation (PCEDC) has officially integrated a Tourism Initiative into our 2026 Strategic Plan. This shift marks a sophisticated expansion of our mission to ensure Pierce County remains a premier destination for both visitors and investment.

It is important to note that this new focus does not replace our foundational work. The PCEDC remains deeply committed to the "bread and butter" of economic development: housing availability, infrastructure improvements, and business expansion and retention. By adding tourism as a strategic priority, we are simply

adding a powerful tool to our toolkit. High-level PR and a unified brand identity act as a force multiplier for our traditional goals—making our communities more attractive to the workforce we need and the developers we seek. The question remains, though, how exactly does Tourism benefit economic development?

### **The Multiplier Effect**

Tourism serves as a powerful catalyst for economic development by injecting "new money" into a local economy through the export of services. When visitors spend on lodging, dining, transportation, and entertainment, they create a multiplier effect: a hotel buys produce from local farmers, who then spend their earnings at local shops, circulating wealth through multiple layers of the community. This demand directly generates employment opportunities, ranging from entry-level service roles to specialized management and entrepreneurial ventures. The need to accommodate travelers often pushes governments to invest in infrastructure, such as improved roads, airports, and public utilities, which benefits the local population.

### So, Why Now?

Historically, tourism efforts have been fragmented. To build a stronger regional economy, we are moving toward a Unified Pierce County brand identity. This replaces isolated marketing with a clear, cohesive message that benefits every corner of the county.

To ensure this initiative is both strategically sound and expertly executed, we have implemented a two-tiered governance structure:

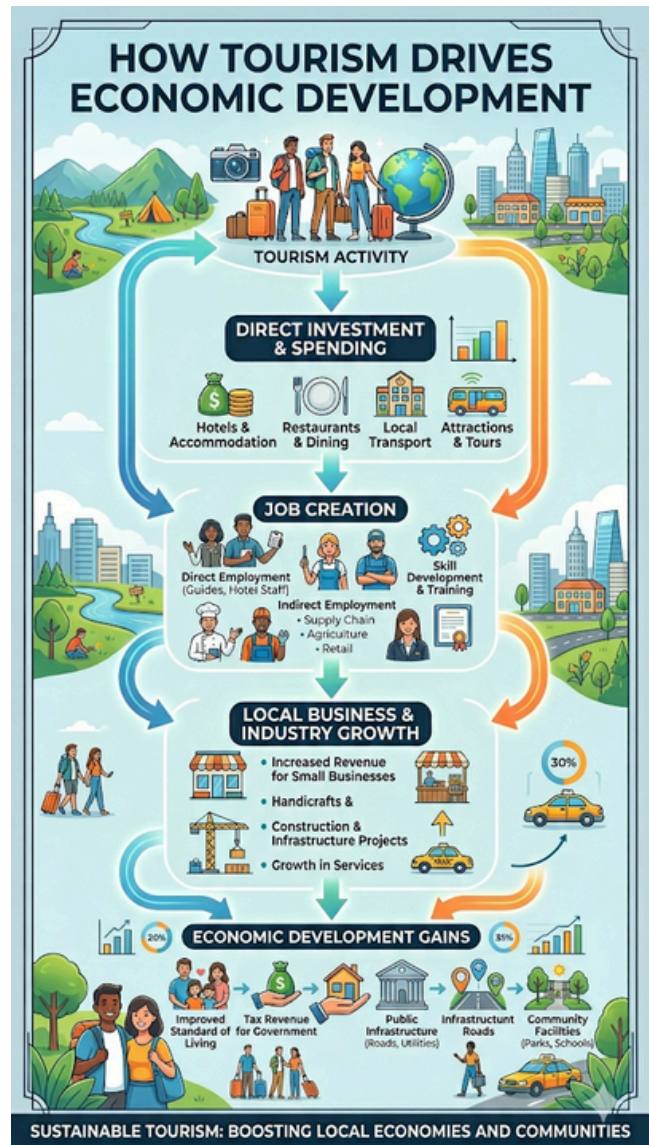
- The Tourism Committee: Comprised of PCEDC Board members and leadership, this body handles high-level decision-making, governance, and budget allocation.
- The Tourism Advisory Board: A "think tank" of industry professionals and marketing experts from local, regional, and state levels. They provide the technical data and industry trends needed to keep our strategy market-ready.

### First Steps: Digital Visibility

Our immediate priority is optimizing our digital presence. We are auditing how Pierce County is represented on major platforms, including the Backroads Website and other state-level resources. We help local businesses communicate clearly and attractively, giving them the professional PR and exposure they need to thrive.

### Looking Ahead

There is a lot of work to do, and we are just getting off the ground, but by treating tourism as a pillar of economic development, we are creating a synergy where community development and destination marketing work hand-in-hand. This initiative is about more than just a visit; it is an investment in the long-term prosperity, visibility, and vitality of Pierce County.





GREAT RIVER ROAD VISITOR & LEARNING CENTER, WI

**ON THE ROAD AGAIN**

**WISCONSIN'S**

**RE GREAT**

**RIVER ROAD**

**All American Road**

# HERITAGE TOURISM



---

## GREAT RIVER ROAD VISITOR & LEARNING CENTER

### **A Gateway to Pierce County**

While many know the Great River Road Visitor & Learning Center for its breathtaking views, its true value lies in its role as a vital engine for Pierce County. Situated at the dramatic confluence of the Mississippi and St. Croix Rivers, the Center is more than a scenic stop—it is a sophisticated hub for regional tourism, environmental education, and community life.

### **A Destination with Global Reach**

The Center serves as a premier "welcome mat" for our county. By drawing thousands of visitors from across the globe each year, it acts as a primary funnel for our local economy. Travelers stopping to pick up maps and guides for the Great River Road (Hwy 35) don't just stay at the park; they venture into our downtowns, dine in our restaurants, and support the small businesses that define our region. As an interpretive center, it provides the essential context that turns a simple drive

into a multi-day exploration of Pierce County's river towns.

### **An Educational Resource**

Beyond tourism, the Center functions as an active classroom. Its mission as an educational facility brings tangible skills and environmental stewardship to our residents through year-round programming:

- Conservation Workshops: From teaching homeowners how to attract bluebirds to their backyards to hosting pollinator planting sessions.
- Youth Engagement: Programs like "Reading with a Ranger" and family-friendly nature activities foster a connection between our youth and the unique geography of their home.
- Interactive Learning: With newly refreshed exhibits and a brand-new interactive entrance mural, the Center provides a modern, hands-on way for visitors to understand the delicate ecosystem of the river bluffs.

### The "Living Room" of the Community

At the heart of the facility is Freedom Park, a city park that provides essential "quality of life" infrastructure. It serves as a sanctuary for mental health and community connection:

- Native Pollinator Gardens: Offering a moment of peace for those seeking a quiet stroll.
- Event Facilities: Providing spaces for the parties and milestones that knit our community together.
- Recreational Access: A place where families can picnic in the Gazebo, watch resident Eagles hunt over the bluffs, or walk along the vista



RGREAT RIVER ROAD - CREDIT: TIM FISK



SMILING PELICAN BAKE SHOP, MAIDEN ROCK, WI

The Great River Road Visitor & Learning Center is a testament to what happens when we invest in our natural assets. It remains a free, accessible, and invaluable resource for everyone who calls Pierce County home and anyone who visits.

#### SEASON HOURS:

- MAY - OCTOBER: OPEN TUESDAY THROUGH SATURDAY, 10:00 AM - 5:00 PM, SUNDAY 12:00PM TO 5:00PM, (CLOSED MONDAYS)
- WINTER: OPEN SATURDAYS 10:00AM TO 5:00PM AND SUNDAYS 12:00PM TO 5:00PM

# CRYSTAL CAVE



CRYSTAL CAVE, WI

# TRAVEL AND EXPLORE



---

## CRYSTAL CAVES

### **Hidden Gems: Crystal Cave's Major Impact on Pierce County Tourism**

In the world of regional economic development, tourism is often the first "handshake" between a community and a future resident or business owner. For Pierce County, few ambassadors are as compelling—or as cool—as Crystal Cave in Spring Valley.

As we lean into our new County Tourism Initiative, we are highlighting the destinations that don't just draw a crowd, but actively circulate wealth and talent throughout our local economy. Crystal Cave is a masterclass in this "multiplier effect."

### **A Regional Magnet**

Crystal Cave attracts approximately 50,000 visitors every year, drawing families from across Western Wisconsin and the Twin Cities. For Executive Director Eric McMaster, the cave is the starting point for a much larger journey through the county.

"When people come here, they're not just visiting the cave," McMaster says. "They're stopping at restaurants, visiting shops, and discovering other things to do in Pierce County—including our incredible cheese." By acting as a regional day-trip destination, the cave effectively "imports" consumers who spend their dollars in our local storefronts, fueling the small businesses that make our communities unique. "Our goal is to create a gateway for people to explore everything Pierce County has to offer, turning a single afternoon into a lifelong connection with our community," notes Eric McMaster of Crystal Cave.

### **Strategies for Staying Longer**

A core pillar of our tourism strategy is increasing "dwell time"—the amount of time a visitor spends in our area before heading home. The more there is to do, the longer they stay, and the more they contribute to our local tax base. Crystal Cave has addressed this by diversifying its attractions. The addition of Tee-Rex Educational Mini-

Golf has transformed a standard tour into a multi-activity outing. "Tee-Rex gives families another reason to spend time at Crystal Cave," McMaster explains. "It's a fun activity that keeps kids engaged while also introducing them to science and natural history."

### **Importing Talent, Supporting Community**

The economic impact isn't limited to the visitors. Crystal Cave plays a unique role in our local workforce through its seasonal internship program. By providing on-site staff housing, the cave can recruit young professionals from outside the area, bringing new energy into Spring Valley. "Our staff housing allows us to recruit interns and seasonal employees from outside the area," says McMaster. "While they're here, they're supporting local businesses and becoming part of the community."

Nature's Constant Climate Regardless of the Wisconsin weather, the cave offers a reliable draw. Maintaining a steady 50 degrees year-round, it serves as what McMaster calls "nature's air conditioning"—cool in the summer and surprisingly warm in the winter. "No matter what the thermometer says outside, the cave provides a perfectly consistent environment that allows us to welcome visitors year-round," says Eric McMaster of Crystal Cave.

As we continue to roll out the County Tourism Initiative, Crystal Cave remains a shining example of how a single attraction

can anchor an entire ecosystem of commerce, recreation, and community pride.



PROSPECTORS CREEK AT CRYSTAL CAVES, WI

### **SEASON HOURS:**

- MAY 23 - SEPTEMBER 7: OPEN MONDAY THROUGH FRIDAY, 9:30 AM - 5:30 PM, SATURDAY AND SUNDAY 9:30 AM - 6:30 PM
- WINTER: CLOSED NOVEMBER 1ST - MARCH 31ST (REOPENING APRIL 1ST)

# VISIT HERE

[WWW.BACKROADSPIERCECOUNTY.COM](http://WWW.BACKROADSPIERCECOUNTY.COM)

**SO MUCH MORE HERE!**

## **FAMILY ADVENTURE**



Visit the Backroads Website for **family adventures**, including a stop at our highly rated **Crystal Cave Experience**.



## **ROAD TRIPPING**



Visit the Backroads Website for **Adventures** on the **Great River Road**.

# CURATED EXPERIENCES



## Artisans

[View Artisans](#)



## Food and Beverage

[View Food and Beverage](#)



## Parks and Campgrounds

[View Parks and Campgrounds](#)



## Festivals

[View Festivals](#)



## Farm Experiences

[View Farm Experiences](#)



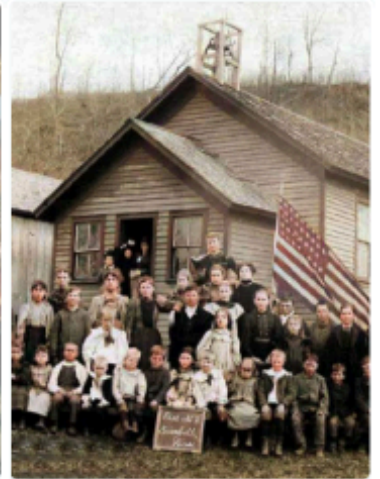
## Lodging

[View Lodging](#)



## Retail and Shops

[View Retail and Shops](#)



## Historic Sites

[View Historic Sites](#)



PIERCE COUNTY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION  
410 SOUTH THIRD STREET, UWRF, SBE  
RIVER FALLS, WI 54022